



Centre for
Cross Border Cooperation

Briefing Note on the Electronic Travel Authorisation scheme and the Windsor Framework

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About the Centre for Cross Border Cooperation

The Centre for Cross Border Cooperation,¹ 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).

Introduction

Introduced as part of the [2022 Nationality and Borders Act](#), the Electronic Travel Authorisation system was introduced by the UK Government as a means ‘to deliver a more streamlined, digital immigration system which will be quicker and more secure for the millions of people who pass through the UK border each year’. It is for ‘visitors to the UK who do not currently need a visa for short stays, or who do not already have a UK immigration status’.² The ETA ‘is a digital permission to travel – it is not a visa and does not permit entry into the UK – it authorises a person to travel to the UK’.³

The roll-out of the UK’s Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) system will include non-visa nationals from the EU/EEA/Switzerland from 2 April 2025 (with citizens from these countries being able to apply from 5 March 2025).⁴ This will mean those non-visa nationals wishing to visit the UK, including Northern Ireland, will have to apply online for an ETA prior to entering the UK at a cost set to rise to £16 per ETA (from the current cost of £10).⁵

When the legislation introduced by the previous UK Government began to be implemented, the ETA system as it was originally designed would have required even non-visa nationals resident in the Republic of Ireland to apply for an ETA to cross into Northern Ireland. Following pressure from a range of organisations, including the [Ad-Hoc Group for North-South and East-West Cooperation](#) (which the Centre for Cross Border Cooperation convenes), the UK Government introduced an exemption for non-visa nationals legally

¹ The Centre was established in September 1999 as the Centre for Cross Border Studies, but began trading under the name Centre for Cross Border Cooperation in September 2024 when it celebrated its 25th anniversary.

² Those who do not need a visa for short stays in the UK are often referred to as “non-visa nationals”. Among the means for non-Irish EU citizens to acquire UK immigration status is through [the UK’s EU Settlement Scheme](#).

³ UK Home Office, “[Electronic Travel Authorisation \(ETA\) factsheet – March 2025](#)”.

⁴ See UK Home Office, [UK to expand digital travel to more visitors - GOV.UK](#) (published 10 September 2024).

⁵ See UK Home Office, [Next steps for a more efficient immigration system - GOV.UK](#) (published 16 January 2025).

resident in the Republic of Ireland, meaning that they will not need an ETA not only to enter Northern Ireland but also the rest of the [Common Travel Area](#), which includes Great Britain.

The ETA and Article 1 of the Windsor Framework

Article 1(3) of the Windsor Framework (formerly the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland), which forms part of [the Withdrawal Agreement](#) between the UK and the EU, states:

This protocol sets out arrangements necessary to address the unique circumstances on the island of Ireland, to maintain the necessary conditions for continued North-South cooperation, to avoid a hard border and to protect the 1998 Agreement in all its dimensions.

The ETA could be seen as conflicting with Article 1's commitment to 'address the unique circumstances on the island of Ireland'. The exemption for non-visa nationals legally resident in the Republic of Ireland was a positive step in recognising the cross-border mobility that is a feature of the unique circumstances on the island of Ireland. However, the exemption comes with the proviso that those who are exempt may need to prove that this is the case. In this regard, a clear statement is needed on whether the guidance provided to Home Office staff will be applicable to entry from the Republic of Ireland into Northern Ireland, and who will be responsible for its enforcement and how will it be enforced. What will happen if a person exempt from having an ETA crossed from the Republic of Ireland into Northern Ireland but without the means to prove that they are exempt?

The documentary evidence that a non-visa national 'may be required' to show that they are legally resident in the Republic of Ireland and therefore exempt from the ETA rules will not necessarily be readily available to someone living in the border region and crossing the border into Northern Ireland on a regular basis as part of their daily lives, whereas it may be more applicable to those travelling into other parts of the Common Travel Area (for example, flying from Dublin to London). This is particularly the case for children aged 16 and 17 who are less likely to be in possession of the documents listed in the guidance as evidence of lawful residence in Ireland.⁶

The ETA and Article 11 of the Windsor Framework

Article 11(1) of the Windsor Framework sets out the joint commitment made by the EU and the UK that:

this Protocol shall be implemented and applied so as to maintain the necessary conditions for continued North-South cooperation, including in the areas of environment, health, agriculture, transport, education and tourism, as well as in

⁶ See UK Home Office, "[Electronic Travel Authorisation: Irish Resident exemption](#)" (published 20 July 2023).

the areas of energy, telecommunications, broadcasting, inland fisheries, justice and security, higher education and sport.

In terms of Article 11 of the Windsor Framework, the ETA directly impacts on a formal area of cooperation – tourism – under the [North South Ministerial Council](#) (NSMC) and has consequences for Tourism Ireland, a body established under the NSMC and Strand 2 of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. Tourism Ireland, which has responsibility for promoting the island of Ireland overseas as a tourist destination, submitted evidence to the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in April 2022. In its submission it addressed the legislation that would eventually introduce the ETA scheme. Among the concerns it raised was the fact that:

Having to apply online for pre-travel clearance in order to cross the border would add an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy and complexity. Tourism Ireland research has continually confirmed that hassle and expense are key deterrents for travellers when choosing their holiday destination. For example, over the past two years, Tourism Ireland and Tourism Northern Ireland’s experiences in communicating the different COVID-19 entry requirements for the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland to tour operators demonstrated that any additional administration resulted in cancellations and lost business.⁷

The tourism sector has been advocating for the UK Government to introduce exemptions in the operation of the ETA scheme. Given the limited number and frequency of direct flight routes to Northern Ireland in comparison particularly with Dublin airport, the Northern Ireland tourism sector depends to a large extent on overseas visitors crossing the border from the Republic of Ireland into Northern Ireland. Indeed, the Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance has noted that ‘The majority of overseas visitors (70%) arrive via the Republic of Ireland’.⁸ The expansion of the ETA scheme may have a particularly significant negative impact on the number of day-trippers crossing the border into Northern Ireland, making it less likely that such tourists will make a last-minute decision to visit Northern Ireland faced with the need to apply and pay for an ETA before they do so.

Therefore, in order to minimise the impact on an area of North-South cooperation under the NSMC, it is important that the UK Government introduce the minimal mitigations being called for by the tourism sector. Additionally, given investments by tour operators to exploit the potential of visitors from the EU, particularly more senior citizens, to visit multiple sites within the Common Travel Area as part of single package, it would be beneficial for the ETA system to accept National Identity cards as forms of identification.

⁷ Tourism Ireland, [statement-to-northern-ireland-affairs-committee-april-2022_1.pdf](#) (20 April 2022).

⁸ Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance, [Electronic Travel Authorisation Update | Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance](#) (published 16 October 2023).