

THE CENTRE FOR CROSS BORDER STUDIES AND ITS WORK IN THE IRISH BORDER REGION

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The Centre for Cross Border Studies, with offices in Armagh and Dublin, was 10 years old last month. In that time the Centre and its associated organisations have completed over 70 cross-border research projects in areas such as education, training, health, public administration, planning, the economy, agriculture and ICT. We have held over 50 cross-border conferences and seminars. We have also provided the secretariat for cross-border and all-island networks such as Universities Ireland (bringing together the nine universities); the Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South (linking 38 colleges of education and other teacher education providers) and the International Centre for Local and Regional Development (bringing together spatial planners). We train civil servants, including local authority officials, in cross-border cooperation. We have set up a number of major public information websites: notably Border Ireland (www.borderireland.info), which provides the first ever comprehensive database of information about cross-border issues in Ireland; and Border People (www.borderpeople.info) which provides practical information for people moving across the border to live, work, study and retire. And more recently, with funding from the EU INTERREG IVA programme (through the Special EU Programmes Body), we have started work on five research, information and training projects on reviving the border region economy, cross-border planning, cross-border hospitals, cross-border mobility information and cross-border impact assessment under the common title: the Ireland/Northern Ireland Cross-border Cooperation Observatory (INICCO).

I am going to talk today about some of the things my Centre and other border region organisations are doing in four areas which I think will be of particular interest to public representatives in the region: health, training, planning and the provision of information to help the citizens of our formerly conflicted region to work together across that border to improve their lives.

Health in our geographically peripheral and politically marginalised region is problematic. The major hospitals are far away – smaller local hospitals are often under threat from government centralisation plans – and local doctors are often spread thinly. The existence of two states that turned their backs on each other for nearly 80 years up to the late 1990s meant that there was little or no history of cooperation in this, as in so many other areas.

Things started to change in the 1990s through the efforts of a group of health professionals who worked to bring the health authorities of the border regions in the two jurisdictions together into a visionary new network: Cooperation and Working Together (CAWT). Between 2000 and 2007 CAWT developed – largely with EU cross-border INTERREG funding – pilot projects in mental health, road safety, sex offenders, foster care, health impact assessment training, diabetes care, emergency planning and local doctors 'out of hours' services.

Last summer its success was recognised with the award of €30 million more in INTERREG funding over the next four years for a range of projects including greater access by patients

in the Southern border counties to ENT, cardiovascular and urology services across the border; a specialist eating disorder service and new sexually transmitted disease clinics in the border region; a diabetes education project for children and young people; alternatives to day care for people with disabilities; support for children with autism and schemes to manage obesity.

One of the most useful examples of cooperation has involved contracting surgery and other services from one jurisdiction where there are long waiting lists to the other where there is spare capacity: thus premature babies from Donegal are sent over the border to Altnagelvin hospital in Londonderry; and other contractual exchanges involve hernia surgery, kidney dialysis and eye care. Most of these have been hospital to hospital exchanges, with little or no involvement by central government Departments of Health. One area which has been brought about by inter-governmental agreement is the sending of cancer patients from Donegal to have radiotherapy in Belfast.

However until now these have been essentially short-term solutions to immediate problems: they did not involve any long-term cross-border cooperation arrangements; nor were they a part of overall health planning within the two Irish jurisdictions. There is little or no evidence that individual cooperation initiatives have become embedded in the routine business of health service provision in either jurisdiction, and the actual number of hospital patients crossing the border remain low. All the traditional and extremely complex barriers to health cooperation – such as different funding arrangements (an insurance-based system in the South; the National Health Service in the North), accountability structures, entrenched professional attitudes and medical insurance – have remained in place.

Those involved in healthcare stress that the political context continues to be the most significant factor determining the level of cross-border health care. Both health service providers and government officials have told us that if the inter-governmental arrangements after the 1998 Good Friday Agreement could have been built on, it was likely that, as in other spheres of life such as business, cross-border and all-Ireland working would become an increasingly accepted and natural way things of doing things. However this has generally not happened for a number of reasons: notably the continuing political instability of Northern Ireland up to 2007 – when the DUP and Sinn Fein finally agreed to share power – and the deadlock between those two parties over increased cross-border cooperation since then; the difficulty of defining the parameters for acceptable cross-border health cooperation; and the difficulty of phasing in cross-border cooperation in a period when the health services in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland were firstly facing radical structural overhaul and later severe funding cuts.

The Centre for Cross Border Studies works on a much smaller scale than CAWT. However in the past few months we too have availed of EU INTERREG IVA funding to begin a study to examine the number, size and possible locations of hospitals in the Irish border region if the planning of acute hospital services in the future was on the basis on population needs rather than jurisdictional frontiers. For research purposes, it will assume there is no jurisdictional border and will develop a model of hospital services based *only* on the distribution of patients, available bed numbers, medical specialisms offered, and the availability of transport in the Irish cross-border region.

Training is another area where our Centre has taken a lead. For the past five years we have been training officials from both central government departments and local authorities in how the different administrative systems in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland work; how public finance and governance differs in the two jurisdictions; and how cross-border cooperation works between business, local authorities and community and voluntary groups. There are currently around 700 officials working in North-South and cross-border cooperation on the island of Ireland. Apart from the Centre's courses – which have trained

over 140 of them – there is no training for them in this new, complex and highly sensitive area of public administration. This autumn the Centre is changing its focus somewhat and in partnership with its sister organisation, the International Centre for Local and Regional Development, will offer specialised training courses for border region councillors and officials on how they might work together on planning issues, shared services and social and economic development (again funded by INTERREG). The first of these training courses will begin next month in Newry and Dundalk. We hope to offer a similar course next year in the central border region.

Planning will become an increasingly important responsibility for local officials in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in the next few years. In the North, 2011 will see planning responsibilities returned to local councils after more than 35 years of being handled by central government following their withdrawal in the early 1970s because of abuses by some councils. In the Republic of Ireland, the Minister for the Environment John Gormley (who is also the leader of the Green Party) has said new planning legislation will make sure that never again will local councils be able to rezone huge areas of land for unsustainable property development, a factor that played a major part in the spectacular collapse of the housing market in the Republic in the past two years.

In this rapidly changing context, local councillors and officials in both jurisdictions are facing a steep learning curve. The Centre's associated spatial planning body, the International Centre for Local and Regional Development, has in recent years published widely-praised research projects on cross-border spatial strategies in Ireland; the potential for cross-border collaboration between border towns in areas like sustainable energy and tourism; how small towns and villages on either side of the border can work together; and economic diversification in rural areas in both parts of the island. The findings of these studies will provide much of the content for the INTERREG-funded border region training courses mentioned earlier.

A fourth area of services for cross-border citizens in the border region – in which again my Centre has taken a leading role – is in the **provision of practical information** for people crossing the border to live, work, study or retire. Eight years ago a report commissioned by the two governments called *Obstacles to Mobility* called for the setting up of an online citizens information 'one stop shop' to help the many thousands of people crossing the Irish border for such practical purposes. In 2007 the two governments – through the North/South Ministerial Council – commissioned the Centre for Cross Border Studies to create a pilot website to start providing this information. We are now into the second phase of the Border People mobility information website (www.borderpeople.info), which provides the public with a wide range of information about such things as taxes, social benefits, pensions, job seeking, educational qualifications, health, housing, banking and telecommunications in Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland. This website now receives around 275,000 'hits' per month, and has been praised by a wide range of politicians from Rev Ian Paisley to Martin McGuinness and Dermot Ahern.

One final point. All these initiatives by CAWT and the Centre for Cross Border Studies to improve the lives of the people of the Irish border region by greater cross-border cooperation have been funded by the European Union. Without the EU Peace and INTERREG programmes – and the Special EU Programmes Body which administers them – little of this important work would have happened over the past two decades. After 2014 – when the EU Peace Programme will almost certainly end and INTERREG funding to Ireland and Northern Ireland may be significantly scaled down – I have fears for the sustainability of much of this work. We will be waiting for a very long time for our two cash-starved governments to step in and take it over.

