

COMMUNITIES IN PARTNERSHIP PROJECT

BORDER SCHOOLS AND BORDER COMMUNITIES PROJECT

MORE THAN MINUTES by Claire



People, schools and borders

A research report investigating community experiences and perspectives of primary school provision along the border in Ireland



About

This project aimed to better understand experiences of education and expectations of education provision in border areas, and investigated two stated objectives:

1. explore and better understand the challenges and opportunities of living along the border, particularly in access to education; and
2. engage with parents and other stakeholders on their preferences for sustainable, high quality school provision within their area.

In addition, the project explored the preferences of border communities in terms of the type and location of primary schools and provided insight into their longer-term views regarding sustainable school provision in each area.

The project was funded by the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) which promotes reconciliation and integration between and within communities across Northern Ireland and in the border areas of Ireland. IFI supported this project under its Communities in Partnership Programme (CIPP) with funding provided under the Strengthening Civic Engagement in Border Communities project.

The project was a partnership between Ulster University, the Integrated Education Fund (IEF) and Educate Together and was delivered between October 2022 and September 2023.

The IEF is an independent charity that targets financial support for the development and growth of integrated education. It aims to enable children to learn together in an environment that celebrates religious and cultural diversity, making integration, not separation, the norm in the Northern Ireland education system.

Educate Together is an independent NGO and charity which operates in Ireland supporting and advocating for greater choice of equality-based primary and second-level schools for families through a network of state-funded Educate Together schools.

The School of Education at Ulster University prioritises quality research in education impacting scholarly knowledge, professional practice and society. Our research interests and expertise are grounded in the principles of social justice, equity and inclusion that connect people, places and partnerships locally, nationally and internationally. Ulster University has a national and international reputation for excellence, innovation and regional engagement, making a major contribution to the economic, social and cultural development of Northern Ireland.

Research and Project Team

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Please note: the language used in this report utilises terminology commonly used by respondents. For instance, the Republic of Ireland may be referred to as the Republic or the South, or just Ireland, while Northern Ireland will sometimes be termed the North. Similarly, schools to which primary pupils transfer may be called post-primary or secondary schools

Executive Summary

1. This rural schools project ran from 1 October 2022 to 30 September 2023 and was funded by the International Fund for Ireland *Communities in Partnership Programme* which focuses on strengthening civic engagement. Partner organisations in the project were: the Integrated Education Fund, Educate Together and Ulster University.
2. The overall aim of the project was to develop a better understanding of experiences and perspectives of primary school provision along the border between the Republic of Ireland, which we refer to as Ireland, and Northern Ireland.
3. The two project objectives were to (i) explore and better understand the challenges and opportunities of living along the border, particularly in access to education, and (ii) engage with parents and other stakeholders on their preferences for sustainable, high quality school provision within their area.
4. Preparatory work undertaken by the Ulster University research team during October 2022 involved desk-based research related to the three border areas which would be visited in Phase 1 of the project obtaining ethical approval for the project from Ulster University; and contributing to the project launch media release.
5. Phase 1 of the project ran from November 2022 to February 2023. It involved:
 - a. Visits and engagement on the ground across three selected border areas. Scoping Conversations were arranged with school Principals and Listening Events were undertaken with parents and others from the three local areas to learn about their views and experiences.
 - b. The use of GIS mapping to
 - i. create of a map showing all primary schools within 3 miles (5km) and 5 miles (8km) of the border to build a picture of current provision, and
 - ii. detailed GIS mapping of the potential catchment areas (disregarding the border) of selected primary schools including, where available, households in each area
 - c. Presentations/workshops with key stakeholders to share information about the project, gain insights about education provision in border areas, and provide the opportunity to input into the survey design undertaken in Phase 2 of the project. In some cases, these meetings also led to additional specific information (e.g. from the Department of Education, Northern Ireland) or a suggestion for other people the project team should meet with.
6. The project prioritised opportunities to empower border communities by encouraging them to articulate their concerns, needs, experiences and perspectives in order to learn from them and to help them develop resiliencies and strengthen their sustainability. In Phase 1 (a) Scoping Conversations were held with 26 school principals (13 from Ireland and 13 from Northern Ireland) and 25 individuals participated in the Listening Events (6 from Ireland and 19 from Northern Ireland). Collectively, these generated over 18 hours of recorded conversation with a total of 51 individuals.
7. Main themes emerging from Phase 1 centred around: links with other schools

within and across border areas, including cross-border school links; opportunities for school communities to foster linkages with other communities in border areas, including across the border; challenges for schools communities, including rural isolation and depopulation, school and public transport, and differences between the education systems in the two jurisdictions. Implications of both Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic also arose in these conversations.

8. Information has been shared within and between communities and with wider stakeholders at key stages in the project. In Phase 1 (c) three workshops were undertaken with different key stakeholder groups. These included: educational stakeholders (statutory bodies and other education organisations in Ireland and Northern Ireland); political representatives (local and national political representatives in Ireland and Northern Ireland); and staff from representative organisations that included teaching unions, farming organisations, rural bodies, and parent representative groups. A total of 46 individuals participated in the online workshops (16 from Ireland and 30 from Northern Ireland).
9. There were two mapping elements in Phase 1 of the project. In Phase 1 (b i) a map was created which showed the locations of primary schools within a buffer of 3 miles (4.8km) and 5 miles (8.0km) from the border and the sector/type of school. In total, there are 229 primary schools within 5 miles (8.0km) of the border (114 in Ireland and 115 in Northern Ireland). Data was also gathered on school enrolments and school sector/type. In terms of school enrolment, there are 25 schools with fewer than 50 pupils within 5 miles (8km) of the border in Ireland and 6 schools with fewer than 50 pupils within 5 miles (8km) of the border in Northern Ireland.
10. In Phase 1 (b ii) detailed GIS mapping was undertaken showing locations of households and primary schools in the three geographic locations along the border. These areas were not necessarily the same areas selected for the engagement in Phase 1 (a) to ensure the anonymity of the respondents involved in that phase. School catchment areas were mapped in order to better represent the potential for cross-border access to primary school. By identifying households within a 3 mile (5km) and 5 mile (8km) road travel distance from each primary school, it was possible to infer the potential catchment, including for cross-border pupils.
11. Phase 2 of the project ran from March - July 2023. Findings from Phase 1 informed the design, content and implementation of an online survey aimed at those living in border areas in Ireland and Northern Ireland. The survey was an opportunity to gain understanding about life in border areas from a wider range of individuals and provided additional rigour to the overall project findings. There were 249 responses to the survey.
12. The online survey in Phase 2 was an opportunity to further engage with, and give a voice to, individuals along the border, including those outside of the areas visited in Phase 1, and collected data on: individual backgrounds, household composition, the county in which they lived, proximity to the border and the extent to which they cross the border, for what purposes, reflections about the area in which they lived, as well

as specific questions relating to primary school provision.

13. The survey findings reinforced the findings from Phase 1 as common themes emerged. Findings revealed perceived advantages and disadvantages of life in border communities; concerns regarding the potential impact of Brexit; rationale for primary school preferences; challenges and opportunities for primary schools in border areas; perceived differences between primary schools on either side of the border; and views on the sustainability and future of local primary schools.
14. Phase 3 of the project ran from May - August 2023 and centred around further engagement with community participants in two of the areas visited in Phase 1 (a) of the project. This enabled both the sharing of what had been learnt in the project to date and further, deeper Community Conversations to take place, consolidating and contributing to a better understanding of life in these communities and the extent to which there are opportunities and/or potential barriers to working in partnership, particularly in relation to education.
15. This deeper Community Conversation phase involved six discrete events, three in each location – two day-time events (one on each side of the border), and an evening event located close to the border. In total, 10 individuals participated in this phase. The smaller number of participants created opportunities for more in- depth conversations and as a result rich insights were obtained.
16. As with previous phases of the project, both the challenges and opportunities of life in border communities came to the fore. In-depth conversations allowed for discussion of the unique characteristics of border communities, changing attitudes to the border, community links within each jurisdiction and across the border, and potential areas of division. In relation to education provision, there was discussion of the particular characteristics of small rural schools; the challenges facing primary schools; perceptions of education across the border; educational links within and across each jurisdiction; and the potential and challenges for cross-border mobility for educational purposes. As with the community and participatory engagement in Phase 1, this final phase enabled identification, discussion and sharing of opportunities for greater cross-school and school community collaboration in the local area and some of the challenges which need to be overcome, in order to strengthen these communities not just at a local level but which can also be shared with other border communities as part of the learning from this project.
17. The final three months of the project, July - September 2023, involved analysis of the material collected, preparation of the final report and working with an artist to create a 'visual minutes' illustration of the project, and further sharing and dissemination of what had been learnt from the communities and individuals who participated in the project to widen support networks. The concerns and needs of border communities were shared with a network of support bodies and statutory organisations in both jurisdictions to ensure a deeper awareness and understanding of the issues and potential solutions. This includes examples of collaboration across school communities (and the border) which could be further developed going forward to ensure a viable future for

these communities. Interim findings were presented to 26 people at a public event at Féile and Phobail in August 2023, and three final workshops were held with the stakeholder groups (involving a total of 35 participants from NI and RoI representing educational stakeholders, political representatives, and representative organisations). A final open public event, attended by 23 individuals, including some from outside Ireland, was held to share the main findings of the project and invite responses and discussion on the outcomes of the project. Those who had participated in earlier phases of the project were also invited to attend this final event.

18. Key conclusions from the project include:

- the disparities in planning approaches to small schools in each jurisdiction;
- a lack of information for parents for accessing and navigating cross-border educational opportunities at primary level;
- challenges in terms of disparities in school age, school structures and curriculum, making transfer between schools, school levels, and jurisdictions complex;
- lack of opportunities for teachers, and other educational stakeholders, to pursue joint professional learning and professional development;
- challenges to collaboration between schools due to COVID-19, and funding cuts;
- social and religious/community divisions in some areas are prevalent and there are mixed views in communities as to how to address these in education provision;

- promising initiatives and examples of good practice exist and could be shared more widely.

19. Key recommendations from the project include:

- *Learners*: Building on the potential strengths of school collaboration as promoted in SSP, creating cross-border collaborations where such clusters naturally exist.
- *Parents*: A short, accessible leaflet jointly produced by each Department of Education clearly stating the possibilities of accessing cross-border education, the potential benefits and pitfalls, and clear procedural guidelines.
- *Teachers*: Consideration of developing professional structures that enable teachers to collaborate across the border.
- *Communities*: Additional mechanisms that enables/facilitates ongoing, sustained community voices and builds on the project, focusing on sustainable education provision and the relationship between primary school provision and sustainable, resilient communities – for example, some seem to want patronage change/transformation while others argue against.
- *System learning*: Joint professional learning opportunities promoted and supported and sharing best practice between wider educational stakeholders.
- *Research*: Further rigorous research in border communities, especially in those where continued educational provision is or may become uncertain in the longer term.

It is intended that the report and a webpage for the project will be made publicly available online as a legacy of the project and to ensure widest possible dissemination and reach. Peer reviewed journal articles and conference presentations may also be undertaken on completion of the project.

Phase 1:

Initial Visits to Three Areas

Report Completed: April 2023

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1. Context

1.1 Borders

Some international borders seem to persist for many years, while others have shifted position, or have effectively disappeared after conflicts or changes in political arrangements. Thus, there can be de-bordering, when borders effectively disappear, and places can be re-bordered, when international borders are created, or recreated. The borders of Europe have seen much change in the 20th century, following two world wars which redrew much of the political geography of the continent. Following WWII, there were considerable efforts to reduce the impact of borders as barriers to trade and the movement of people, particularly represented in the creation of what is now the European Union.

Border communities have generated a lot of research around the world, much of which seems to concentrate on the particular challenges and vulnerabilities which such populations have to face.¹ Border locations may also offer some opportunities for communities. Some populations establish informal entrepreneurial networks across borders and these can often be more resilient than more official cross-border engagement. One example of a changed and changing border will illustrate this. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in central Asia were once divided by a mere administrative border between two republics within a political union. That became, with the breakup of the USSR in 1991, an international one.

Tensions increased from the mid-1990s as what were once traditional communities who shared natural resources in border areas with freedom of movement for people, goods and services found themselves, by the end of the 1980s, embroiled in national disputes about sovereignty. There was a consequent hardening of the borders. Even after the re-bordering, entrepreneurial networks in the communities had established cross-border bazaars for the exchange of goods, and these worked as an important mechanism for social cohesion. However, any form of cooperation is now often deemed illegal by the two governments, and so operating these bazaars has become more difficult. As a result, some border villages in the area have experienced economic stagnation and rapid outmigration.²

1.2 Rurality

Many border areas are rural, and this can bring its own challenges. Some rural areas have a challenge in retaining their populations, which need a healthy mix of age groups including young families to ensure their continued survival. While there is much to attract and retain a population in rural areas, this depends on good infrastructure, including broadband, and sound local businesses providing employment opportunities, community enterprises and other essential services to provide social support to a population. In turn, a lynchpin to secure the viability of these communities is often considered to be a local primary school.³

1 Adrot, A., Fiedrich, F., Lotter, A., Münzberg, T., Rigaud, E., Wiens, M., Raskob, W. and Schultmann, F. (2018) Challenges in establishing cross-border resilience. In *Urban Disaster Resilience and Security* (pp. 429-457). Springer, Cham.

2 Reeves, M. (2014) *Border Work: Spatial Lives of the State in Rural Central Asia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; Murzakulova, A. (2018) *Challenges of social cohesion and tensions in communities on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border*. <https://www.ucentralasia.org/Content/Downloads/Challenges%20of%20Social%20Cohesion%20and%20Tensions%20in%20Communities%20on%20the%20Kyrgyz-Tajik%20Border%20-%20eng.pdf>

3 Haynes, M. (2022) The impacts of school closure on rural communities in Canada: a review. *The Rural Educator*, 43(2), pp.60-74.

Schools play a vital role in whether rural communities will be viable and prosperous,⁴ offering social support to communities in ways not amenable to cost-benefit analysis.⁵ There is considerable evidence to suggest that schools can support and sustain rural communities, providing a hub for the community as well as educational opportunities, and closure of rural schools has been termed a ‘recipe for depopulation’.⁶ Another view is that, while the closure of a rural primary school may be viewed as a ‘death-blow’ to a community, it may be that this is a symptom of a slow decline of a community through depopulation, a process which may pre-date the closure of the school, rather than the primary cause.⁷ However, the balance of research seems to find that school closures lead to decline, rather than the other way round.⁸

Across Ireland, research indicates that border communities have suffered disproportionately from economic deprivation, migration, and sectarian violence.⁹ Established a century ago, the border in Ireland divided the island into Northern Ireland, remaining part of the United Kingdom, and the newly independent country which would eventually become the Republic of Ireland, which from this point we will refer to as Ireland.

This new international border cut across the natural hinterlands of settlements. Many of these areas were already relatively peripheral before the border was established, and the imposition of a border from 1921 caused further challenges, particularly when travel across the border was severely restricted during periodic violence. Shops were cut off from potential customers and workers from potential employment. Centralised health, community and educational facilities were also weakened, often to the detriment of communities on both sides of the border. The Common Travel Area (CTA), established in 1952, enabled Irish and UK Irish nationals to travel freely between one country and the other for work, education, entertainment or other purposes. However, the border hardened again during the 30 years of ‘The Troubles’, with many border crossings being declared ‘unapproved’ and blocked by the UK security forces.¹⁰ However, after the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, and with both the UK and Ireland in the EU, the border faded in importance and became almost wholly permeable – the island of Ireland had effectively been ‘debordered’. Residents along the border may still characterise their region as ‘marginalised’, ‘deprived’, ‘isolated’ and ‘on the periphery’, but cross-border cooperation had done much to address these challenges.

4 Oncescu, J. (2014). The impact of a rural school’s closure on community resiliency. *Leisure*, 38(1), 35-52.

5 Lauzon, A., & Leahy, D. (2001). Rural schools and educational reform: Should we keep rural schools open? A review of the literature, OMAFRA Research Report Project O23450. University of Guelph School of Rural Extension Studies. https://realrenewal.files.wordpress.com/2013/08/lauzon_-_should_we_keep_rural_schools_open.pdf

6 Barakat, B. (2015) A ‘recipe for depopulation’? School closures and local population decline in Saxony. *Population, space and place*, 21(8), pp.735-753.

7 Egelund, N.&H. Laustsen (2006), School Closure: What are the Consequences for the Local Society? *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 50, pp. 429–439.

8 Sørensen, J.F.L., Svendsen, G.L.H., Jensen, P.S. and Schmidt, T.D. (2021) Do rural school closures lead to local population decline?. *Journal of rural studies*, 87, pp.226-235.; Elshof, H., Haartsen, T. and Mulder, C.H. (2015) The effect of primary school absence and closure on inward and outward flows of families. *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie*, 106(5), pp.625-63; Sageman, J. (2022) School Closures and Rural Population Decline. *Rural Sociology*, 87(3), pp.960-992.

9 Byrne, S., Skarlato, O., Fissuh, E., & Irvin, C. (2009). Building trust and goodwill in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties: the impact of economic aid on the peace process. *Irish Political Studies*, 24 (3), 337– 363. p.341

10 Patterson, H. (2012) The border security problem and Anglo-Irish relations 1970–1973. *Contemporary British History*, 26(2), pp.231-251.

Unremarkably and uncontroversially, cross-border connections have become a means of overcoming the dual challenges of underdevelopment and geographical peripherality. Economies of scale, small-step exports, social enterprise, cross-community projects, tourism initiatives, even bargain hunting – in the past fifteen years, habits of cross-border movement have been developing that have brought evident and practical gain.¹¹

Some fear that Brexit may threaten these gains¹² and any impact will be felt most acutely along the Irish border¹³ with a threat of a hard border impacting on trade and social cohesiveness in communities that straddle the border.

1.3 Small schools

Schools play an important role in supporting rural communities and, as we have seen, their closure may herald a decline in community resilience.¹⁴ Many rural areas, including those close to the border, have small schools. In Ireland, small schools are variously defined. In a 2013 review, they were considered schools with an enrolment of less than 50 pupils.¹⁵ Later they were defined as those with

four or fewer mainstream teachers. Using the latter definition, there are over 1,380 small schools in Ireland, almost 44% of all primary schools, and almost 15% of primary school pupils attend a small school.¹⁶ In Northern Ireland, there is no agreed definition of what constitutes a small school but, given the aim for all rural primaries to have at least 105 pupils,¹⁷ “it makes sense to define small rural primary schools as those schools located in rural areas with less than 105 pupils enrolled. In 2020/21, 43% of all rural schools [in Northern Ireland] are small if this definition is applied”.¹⁸

It has been suggested that small schools, which seem to be the norm in rural areas, provide a less effective educational experience for children. For example, composite classes, bringing together children of different ages in the same classroom, are a means of coping with small numbers of children in each year group with limited staffing. Some have termed this “inferior to more homogeneous age grouping”.¹⁹ Additionally, because the pupils in a smaller school will be drawn from the immediate locality, it is likely that the degree of social mixing and experience of diversity will be lower than in a larger school.²⁰ Alternative

11 Hayward, K. (2017) *Bordering on Brexit: Views from Local Communities in the Central Border Region of Ireland/Northern Ireland*. <https://www.qub.ac.uk/brexit/Brexitfilestore/Fileupload,781170,en.pdf>, p.9

12 Keating, M. (2022) *Brexit and the Irish Border*. Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies Research Paper No. RSC_18. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/Delivery.cfm/SSRN_ID4149424_code2172473.pdf?abstractid=4149424&mirid=1

13 Hayward, 2017

14 Cedering, M. and Wihlborg, E. (2020) Village schools as a hub in the community-A time-geographical analysis of the closing of two rural schools in southern Sweden. *Journal of rural studies*, 80, pp.606-617; Christiaanse, S. and Haartsen, T. (2020) Experiencing place-change: A shared sense of loss after closure of village facilities. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 69, 101432.

15 Department of Education and Skills (2013) *Value for Money review of Small Primary Schools*. <https://assets.gov.ie/31347/0bec734bca434bb0a5e5de612a072016.pdf>

16 Department of Education and Skills (2019) Ministers McHugh and Ring host Consultation Symposium on sustaining small schools. <https://www.gov.ie/ga/preasraitis/ce545a-ministers-mchugh-and-ring-host-consultation-symposium-on-sustaining-/>

17 Bain, G. (2006) Schools for the future: Funding, strategy and sharing. *Report of the Independent Strategic Review of Education*. http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/9777/1/review_of_education.pdf.

18 Fargas-Malet, M. and Bagley, C. (2022) Serving DIVIDED communities: Consociationalism and the experiences of principals of small rural primary schools in Northern Ireland. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, pp.1-22.

19 Åberg-Bengtsson, L. (2009) The smaller the better? A review of research on small rural schools in Sweden, *International Journal of Educational Research*, 48 (2), p.102

20 Smyth, E., Devlin, A., Bergin, A. and McGuinness, S. (2022) A North-South comparison of education and training systems: Lessons for policy (No. 138). *Research Series*.

research points to the advantages that small schools offer.²¹ Composite classes may actually provide increased opportunities for reciprocal learning and peer-teaching across age groups,²² and some research has found that participation rates in extracurricular activities in smaller schools is greater than in larger ones.²³

1.4 Cross-border movement

A survey of cross-border movement commissioned in 2011 by the then education ministers on both sides of the border seems never to have been released. There is evidence that children and young people cross the border, in both directions, to attend schools.²⁴ However, there appears to be very limited precise statistical information available. In the 2012/13 academic year, it was reported that there were 275 students with addresses in Ireland enrolled in post-primary schools in Northern Ireland, and 63 in post-primary schools in Ireland with addresses in Northern Ireland.²⁵ No numbers attending Primary schools were provided. While the disparity in numbers was seized upon by some for political purposes, the Department of Education in Northern Ireland responded

There is a long-standing practice of reciprocity between the Department of Education in the North and the Department of Education and Skills in the South in respect of the movement of pupils within border areas... Current northern admissions legislation requires schools' admissions criteria to give priority to northern resident pupils while northern transport legislation does not support transport assistance to a pupil's nearest school outside the North.²⁶

More recent data showing primary school enrolments for 2017/18 indicated very similar numbers crossing the border in each direction, with 112 pupils from the North in Irish primary schools and 106 from the South in Northern Ireland primary schools.²⁷ Movements at post-primary are still greater south to north but the difference is less than in the 2012/13 data (Graph 1).

21 Ronskley-Pavia, M., Barton, G.M. and Pendergast, D. (2019) Multiage education: An exploration of advantages and disadvantages through a systematic review of the literature. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education* (Online), 44(5), pp.24- 41.

22 Raggl, A. (2015) Teaching and learning in small rural primary schools in Austria and Switzerland—Opportunities and challenges from teachers' and students' perspectives, *International Journal of Educational Research*, 74, 127–135.

23 Feldman and Matjasko, 2007

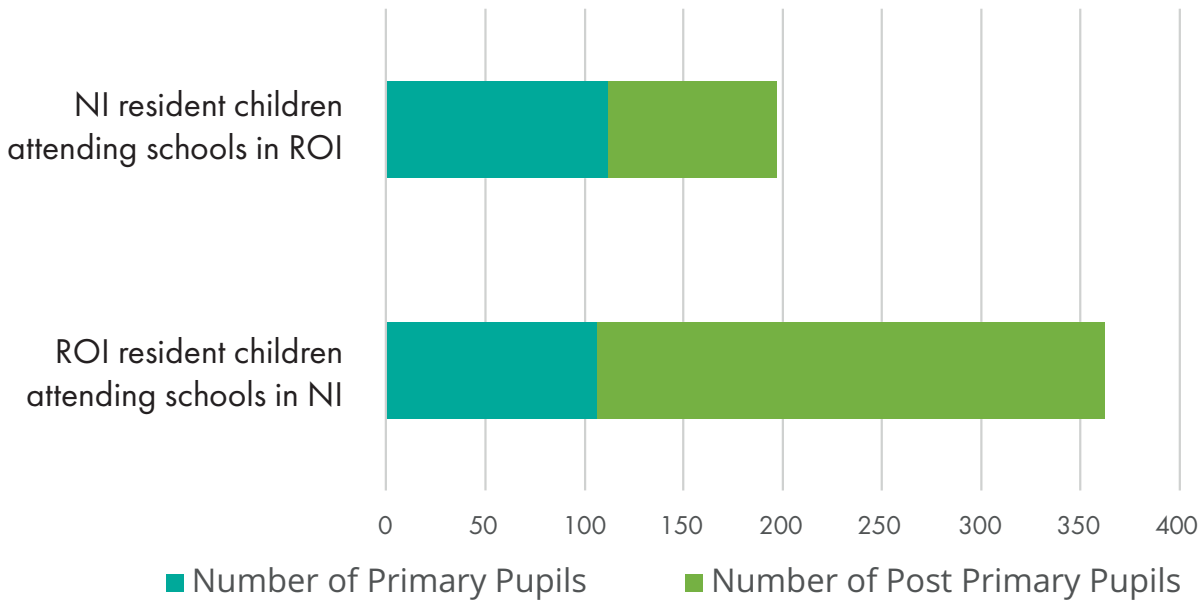
24 Thornthwaite, S. (2014) *The Report of The Independent Review of Home to School Transport*. <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/de/final-home-to-school-transport-review-2014.pdf>: 199-200

25 Ó Curraighín, S. (2013) Four times as many ROI students avail of cross border education, *The Detail*. <https://www.thedetail.tv/articles/four-times-as-many-roi-students-avail-of-cross-border-education>

26 Ó Curraighín, 2013

27 *The Detail* (n.d.) Cross-Border Pupils. <https://www.thedetail.tv/data/cross-border-pupils>

Graph 1: Numbers of pupils crossing the border to attend school (2017/18)



Source: The Detail <https://www.thedetail.tv/data/cross-border-pupils>

The Department of Education in Northern Ireland provided figures for Northern Ireland schools near the border in 2023.²⁸ There are 115 primary schools within 5 miles of the border, with 23,439 children attending 75 Catholic Maintained, 34 Controlled, 2 integrated and 4 Other Maintained Irish Medium schools. The majority of these border schools (n=94) had no children with addresses in Ireland. The remaining 21 schools had a combined total of 58 children enrolled with addresses in Ireland. The school with the largest number of children with addresses across the border had 12 children living across the border and it, and two others with 5 children each, are all from the Controlled sector. The remaining schools have less than five children living in Ireland – these comprise 3 Controlled, 12 Catholic Maintained and 3 Other Maintained Irish Medium schools.

1.5 Cross-border differences in education

Among the factors that militate against easy movement are differences in school structures and curriculum. Additionally, since partition, school types have evolved differently and transfer from primary education to post-primary is at different ages in each jurisdiction.

Table 1 shows some of the differences and similarities in Primary schools, including the Primary Curriculum.

²⁸ Personal Communication from DENI 26th April 2023

Table 1: The primary school curriculum, Ireland and Northern Ireland

Ireland ²⁹	Northern Ireland ³⁰
8 years: Junior infants, senior infants, First class to Sixth class.	7 years: Foundation (Years 1 and 2), Key Stage 1 (Years 3 and 4) and Key Stage 2 (Years 5, 6 and 7)
Transfer to secondary levels schools at 12 years	Transfer to secondary levels schools at 11 years
Curriculum in seven areas, some further subdivided into subjects	Curriculum in six Areas of Learning
Language: Gaeilge and English	Language and Literacy (including Talking and Listening, Reading and Writing; schools are also encouraged to teach additional languages);
Mathematics	Mathematics and Numeracy (focusing on the development of mathematical concepts and numeracy across the curriculum);
Arts education: visual arts, music and drama	The Arts (including Art and Design, Drama and Music);
Social, environmental and scientific education (SESE): history, geography and science	The World Around Us (focusing on the development of knowledge, skills and understanding in Geography, History and Science and Technology);
Social, personal and health education (SPHE)	Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (focusing on emotional development, social skills, learning to learn, health, relationships and sexuality education and mutual understanding in the local and global community);
Physical education	Physical Education (focusing on the development of knowledge, skills and understanding through play and a range of physical activities).
Religious or ethical education (the responsibility of the different school patron bodies.)	Religious Education (schools are issued with non-statutory guidance; this subject is not inspected by the Education and Training Inspectorate)

²⁹ National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (n.d.) *Curriculum Online Primary* <https://curriculumonline.ie/Primary/>

³⁰ Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) (2007) *The Northern Ireland Curriculum Primary* <https://ccea.org.uk/document/924>

While there are differences in some aspects of the curriculum, and in assessment arrangements, there is a considerable overlap in the curriculum with both systems, for example, placing a lot of emphasis on the development of skills in language and mathematics. However, the requirement to study the Irish language is specific to Ireland. Perhaps the major difference in the two jurisdictions is the distorting effect of academic selection on the experience of many primary school pupils in Northern Ireland. Academic testing at age 11, the last year of Northern Ireland's primary education, results in a reduced set of teaching approaches and less breadth in curriculum content as pupils are prepared for the examination.³¹ As a consequence, in Primary schools in NI there is "a narrow coverage of the curriculum areas"³² and "academic selection skews teaching at Key Stage 2 ...[prioritising] literacy and numeracy at the expense of other Areas of Learning".³³ There is no equivalent in Ireland, but academic streaming tends to replicate divisions based on socio-economic status just as academic selection and the division into vocational and academic pathways appear to in NI, and to this day, whilst intergenerational privilege at the secondary and higher education level has waned, private fee-paying schools, especially in the Dublin area, continue to exacerbate this issue.³⁴

The curriculum in Ireland was launched in 1999 but has had changes to the languages and maths curricula, and there are

consultations underway to revise it further, in the light of new insights into children's development and learning, and the skills which are now considered most important. The Northern Ireland primary curriculum, with a focus on skills, was last revised in 2007³⁵ and some believe that it requires revisiting, as its "delivery is not always in keeping with its original design functions".³⁶

The structures and governance of schools also differs. Primary education in Ireland operates an 8-year cycle for most children, and transfer to post-primary schools takes place at 12, whereas the 7-year primary cycle in Northern Ireland means transfer takes place at 11 years. Most schools in Ireland are under Catholic patronage, although there has been a recent growth of multidenominational Educate Together, Community National Schools and Irish Medium schools. In Northern Ireland, primary schools are largely divided by community affiliation with most pupils either attending a Catholic Maintained or a state, de facto Protestant, Controlled school. There are also growing numbers of Integrated and Irish Medium schools.

1.6 Attempts to join schools across the border

There have been two proposals for schools on either side of the border to amalgamate. While in neither case was the amalgamation taken forward, a brief description of each instance may be useful.³⁷

31 Roulston, S. and Milligan, M. (2021) *Academic Selection and the Transfer Test* https://www.ulster.ac.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0010/828901/TEUU-Report-10-Academic-Selection.pdf

32 Gallagher, T. and Smith, A. (2000) The Effects Of The Selective System Of Secondary Education In Northern Northern Ireland. *Educational Review*, 69(3), pp.318-336. p.320. Ireland. Main Report. ResearchGate. p.62

33 Purdy, N., Logue, J., Montgomery, M., O'Hare, K., Redpath, J. (2021) *A Fair Start: Final Report and Action Plan*. <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/fair-start-final-report-action-plan>. p.20

34 Roulston, S. Brown, M., Taggart, S. and Eivers, E. (2023) A Century Growing Apart and Challenges of Coming Together: Education Across the Island of Ireland. *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, 32 (2), *Analysing and Researching Ireland, North and South*, pp.78-121.

35 Smyth et al., 2022

36 Purdy et al., 2021, p.iii

37 Roulston et al., 2023, p.119

A post-primary school close to the border in Co. Fermanagh had been facing closure since 2014. There are other post-primary schools nearby but they are located across the border in Co. Donegal. In 2014, the then Education Minister in Northern Ireland, John O'Dowd, taking into account the isolated rural location of the school, rejected proposals to close the school, saying "The option of cross-border collaboration needs to be further examined and I am calling on [education bodies] to bring forward a pilot scheme which would allow the school to work with schools on the other side of the border".³⁸ This was ultimately unsuccessful with differences in curriculum, assessment and qualifications between Ireland and Northern Ireland, as well as the lack of equivalence in age at transfer to post-primary schools, among the reasons advanced for not progressing with a collaborative cross-border solution. It was decided that this option was an "unproven concept... best placed as part of an educational policy and long-term strategy for the delivery of such schools".³⁹ The Northern Ireland school closed in 2021 with pupils travelling to other schools in the same sector some miles away.

In 2017, a similar proposal for a cross-border confederation solution for a primary school facing closure in Armagh with a school across the border in Co Monaghan was seen as having merit in its innovative approach to area planning, but was ultimately rejected. A range of reasons were provided including the ten-mile distance between the two schools in the proposed federation which would "present significant timetabling difficulties and significant transport costs", and it was deemed "unlikely... that the necessary frameworks and resources could [be] established within a short time frame, reflecting the urgency of the need".⁴⁰ The Northern Ireland school closed in 2017.

38 BBC (2014) St Mary's High School, Brollagh, saved from closure by John O'Dowd. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-28038792>

39 Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) (2019) 'St Mary's High School, Brollagh: The case for change', in Department of Education, DP584 – St Mary's High School, Brollagh (Appendix B) (2021), 20, www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/dp-584-st-marys-high-school-brollagh-0, in Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI) (2017) DP470 – Anamar Primary School <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/dp-470-anamar-primary-school> Appendix B, p.20

40 DENI (2017) DP470 – Anamar Primary School <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/dp-470-anamar-primary-school>

2. Methodology

The project aim is to better understand experiences of education and expectations of education provision in border areas, and will investigate two stated objectives:

- the challenges and opportunities of living in communities along the border, particularly in relation to access to education, and
- the preferences of community members.

2.1 Sequence of research and research instruments

The research was intended to create opportunities for communities in small rural cross-border areas to consider issues which affect the sustainability of their town and villages, including the challenges and opportunities presented by border locations. The project particularly seeks to better understand border communities' experiences of education including the expectations of provision and the extent to which there are shared or divergent experiences for young people and their families. The extent of community interaction from either side of the border, especially in relation to schooling will also be examined.

The project comprised three main inter-related data collection stages:

1. October 2022 - February 2023: In the first stage, both desktop research tasks and listening events/scoping conversations across three cross-border rural areas were conducted. GIS analysis of some border areas was also completed and online meetings were held with representatives from relevant organisations, educational stakeholders and political representatives.

2. March 2023: In the second stage, an online all-island rural border survey were administered.
3. April-June 2023: In the third stage, two in-depth community conversations were carried out.

Data were collected using quantitative and qualitative research instruments.

Listening events/scoping conversations. These were semi-structured meetings with community leaders and representatives, generally scheduled as evening meetings. Facilitated in each of the three targeted areas, these elicited views about and perspectives on community provision, including primary education. One was held in Northern Ireland and, on the subsequent evening, another in Ireland, or vice versa. There were also meetings with individual school leaders in schools located close to the border (within 5 miles) both in Ireland and in Northern Ireland.

Online survey. This was co-developed in partnership with the community representatives, stakeholders and political representatives, and conducted with all residents of border communities in Northern Ireland and the Ireland – a ten-mile radius of the border will be targeted (based on existing data of distance travelled to attend a primary school in rural border areas). The project team used the JISC survey software to develop and administer the survey.

Community conversations. This approach to working with communities has been widely used in Northern Ireland⁴¹ using facilitated workshops, and this methodology was employed with two of the cross-border communities. Initially conversations were held

41 Bates, J. and O'Connor-Bones, U. (2021) Community Conversations: deliberative democracy, education provision and divided societies, *SN Social Sciences*, 1: 45.

separately with each community culminating in one large event aimed at bringing all communities together in the identified region. Each workshop was organised and conducted face-to-face

GIS analysis. This used household data supplied free to Higher Education institutions in Northern Ireland by Land and Property Services alongside publicly available data published by the Department of Education Northern Ireland on the location of primary schools. In Ireland, the Department of Education provided public access data regarding the location of primary schools. Household location data for Ireland is only obtainable under a commercial agreement from Geodirectory. Given the expense of this data source, the GIS analysis concentrated on just three areas along the border. Care was taken not to select regions which matched exactly the three areas which had been visited in Phase 1, as that would have compromised the anonymity of the respondents from those areas.

2.2 Research areas

As Map 1 shows, even when major urban centres at Derry, Newry, Dundalk and Strabane are omitted, there are a large number of primary schools located close to the border, including many within a 3 mile (4.88km) buffer of the border. Three miles is a significant figure as that is the average distance travelled to primary school in Ireland,⁴² and schools within 3 miles of the border are very accessible to pupils from the other jurisdiction. Schools within 5 miles too, would be accessible for cross-border attendance, if parents live quite close across

the border. It should be noted that not all schools close to the border are equally accessible for cross-border traffic. There are places along the border with high ground, especially in south Donegal/Fermanagh, and consequently few road crossings. More common is that the border is a river, and accessibility will depend on the availability of bridging points. This is particularly the case along the Foyle/Mourne/Finn rivers on the border between Donegal and Derry/Tyrone. There are also instances of large private demesnes along the border which can limit connectivity.

Map 1 also clearly illustrates the variety of schools along the border, indicating mixed communities on either side. There are Catholic and Protestant ethos primaries in the border area of Ireland, for example, and both Controlled and Maintained schools in Northern Ireland although, inevitably, in some areas one type of school predominates.

Table 2 provides details of the numbers of primary schools within the 5 mile/8 km buffer of the border, with almost equal numbers of schools on each side. One contrast is the enrolment numbers in each jurisdiction with these border schools in Northern Ireland having an average of 217 pupils while in Ireland the average is 135. As might be expected, average enrolments are higher in those places with urban centres, with Dundalk primaries providing a higher average figure for Louth, for example, and similarly for Newry, Strabane and Derry in Northern Ireland. However, in more rural areas the average enrolments are smaller, particularly evident in Ireland. In the decade up to 2021/22 in Northern Ireland, 85 schools closed, many as a consequence of

⁴² Cited as 4.88km in Kelly, J.A. and Fu, M. (2014) Sustainable school commuting – understanding choices and identifying opportunities. A case study in Dublin, Ireland. *Journal of Transport Geography*, 34, 221-230

school rationalisation applied through Area Planning policies; this may be one of the reasons why so few small schools remain in Northern Ireland. The enrolment figure of 105 is significant as that is one criterion used for assessing the sustainability of schools in Northern Ireland. Consequently, schools with enrolments less than that are much less prevalent in Northern Ireland compared to Ireland. Additionally, the numbers of small schools of 50 pupils or less, and of very small schools, with 25 pupils or fewer, is even more contrasting. There are none of the very small schools in Northern Ireland while 6% of border schools in Ireland are of that size.

Table 2: Numbers and details of primary schools within 5 miles of the border

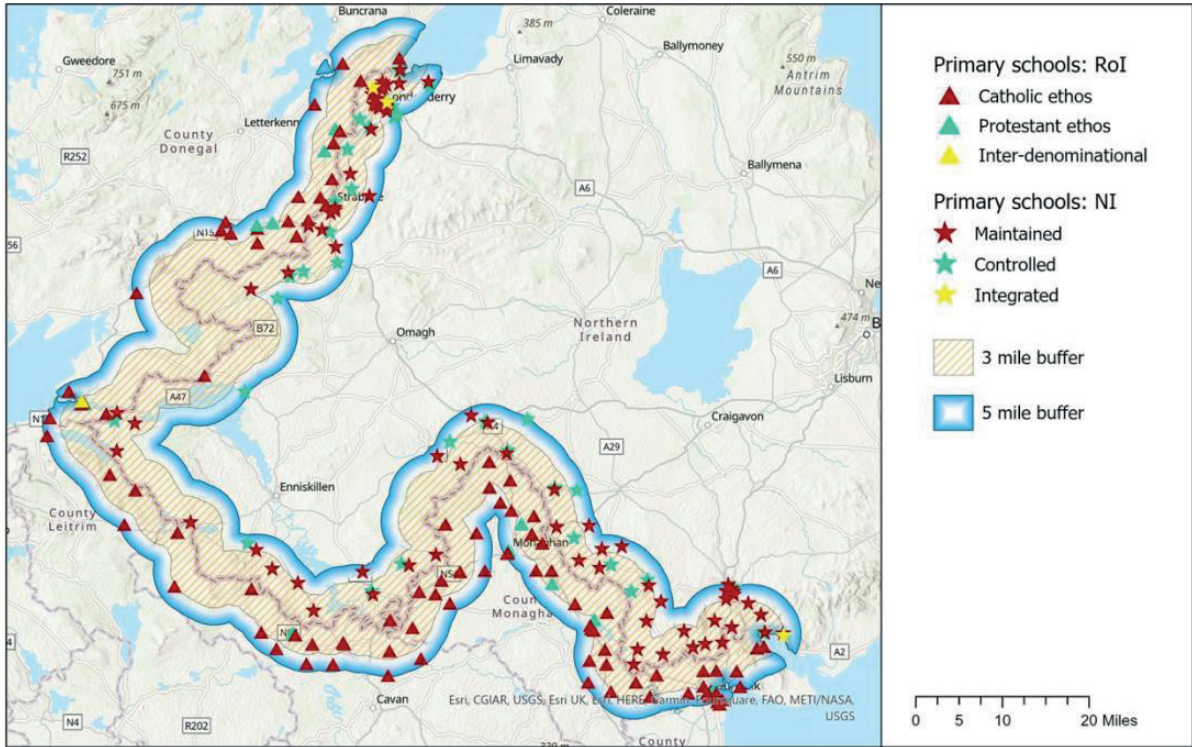
Country and County (Ireland) or (former) District Council (NI)	Numbers of schools	Average enrolment	Nos (%) of schools with enrolment of		
			Less than or equal to 105	Less than or equal to 50	Less than or equal to 25
Ireland	114	135	54 (47%)	27 (24%)	7 (6%)
Donegal	30	123	16 (53%)	10 (33%)	1 (3%)
Monaghan	41	127	19 (46%)	10 (24%)	4 (10%)
Leitrim	4	99	3 (75%)	2 (50%)	1 (25%)
Cavan	16	82	11 (69%)	4 (25%)	1 (6%)
Louth	23	221	5 (22%)	1 (4%)	0 (0%)
Northern Ireland	115	217	30 (26%)	6 (5%)	0 (0%)
Derry	36	306	5 (14%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)
Fermanagh	17	103	10 (59%)	4 (24%)	0 (0%)
Strabane	16	215	3 (19%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Armagh	9	146	2 (22%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Dungannon	10	104	4 (40%)	1 (10%)	0 (0%)
Newry and Mourne	27	289	6 (22%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

In selecting border communities for inclusion, the defining criteria were that the areas:

- are relatively deprived, using mapping of deprivation indices;
- show indications of both Catholic/Protestant communities on both sides of the border using census mapping; and
- with primary schools on both sides of the border, including both Catholic Maintained and Controlled schools on the Northern Ireland side and, where possible, Catholic ethos and Protestant ethos Primary schools on the Irish side.

The initial areas for selection were narrowed down by researchers at Ulster University and development staff in the partner organisations

Map 1: Primary schools along the border



(Educate Together and IEF) using knowledge of the areas. A geographical spread was deemed important, but a balance of similarity and contrast between areas was also considered important in terms of evaluating success and refining the consultation approach. The three areas visited in Stage 1 of the research are not identified here due to ethical considerations around anonymity.

2.3 GIS analysis

The three regions chosen for this analysis included primary schools in the following counties (Ireland) and Local Government Districts (NI):

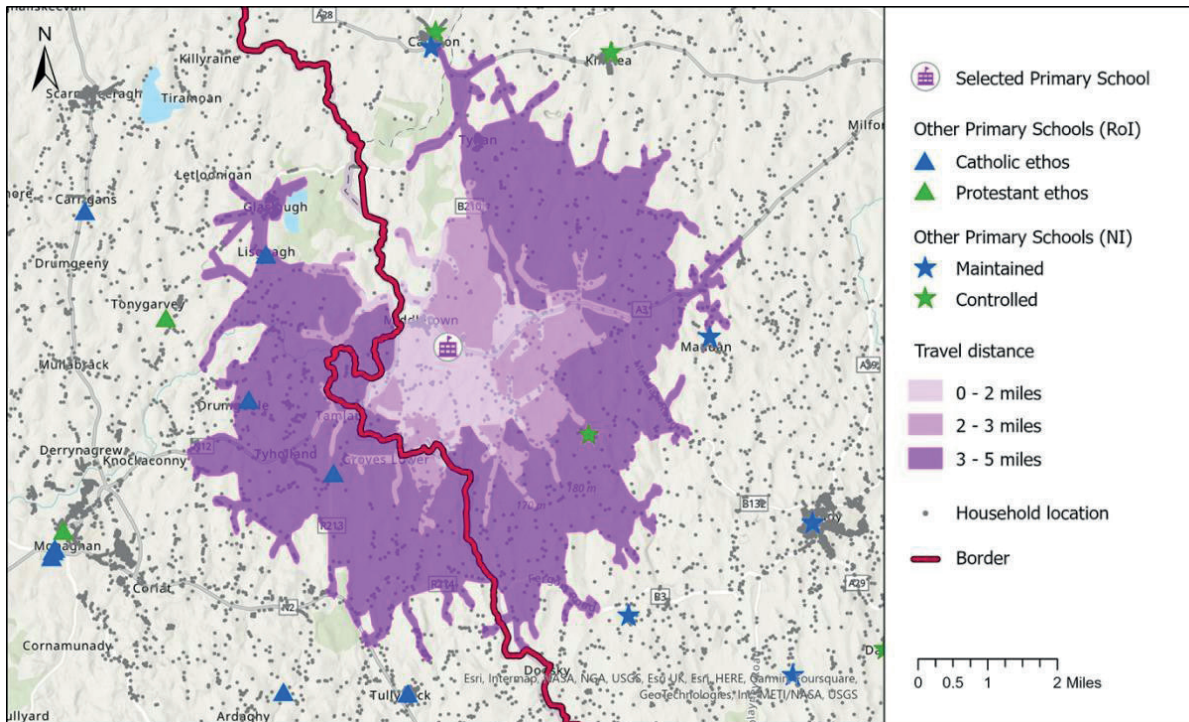
Ireland: Cavan; Donegal; Monaghan, and
NI: Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon; Fermanagh and Omagh; Derry City and Strabane; Mid-Ulster.

It should be emphasised that these were not identical to the areas visited in Stage 1 of the research, but they were chosen to be as

representative of the whole border region as possible.

In all there were 57 schools involved in the analysis, 29 were located in Ireland and 28 in NI. Each of these schools had a potential optimum catchment of 3 miles travel distance by road mapped, and the numbers of households within the catchment was calculated. As we have seen, the average distance travelled to primary school in Ireland is around 3 miles so that distance would appear to be significant to highlight. Of the NI schools, all but 11 had potential access to pupils from Ireland, with cross-border households located within 3 miles of the schools; the school with the highest proportion had over 28% of its households within 3 miles travel distance located across the border. Of the primary schools located in Ireland, all but 12 had the potential for cross-border pupils, with households in NI within a three-mile travel distance.

Map 2: One NI school's catchment highlighted with households shown.



Map 2 shows one school located less than a mile from the border ‘as the crow flies’, which would seem to ensure significant numbers of households on the other side of the border, reasonably accessible to the selected school. However, the map shows that most of the catchment across the border is greater than 3 miles/5 kilometre driving distance as a result of limited bridging points along a river. In addition, there are other primary schools on the other side of the border which would suggest that the selected school is less likely to draw much of their enrolment from there. This contrasts with Map 3 which shows a primary school located in Ireland but, because of its unusual border location and good linkages across the border, can draw its enrolment almost equally from both sides of the border, particularly within the 3 ml/5km catchment. Map 4 shows another school located some distance from the border. A combination of that distance and restricted crossing points means that cross-border movement of pupils

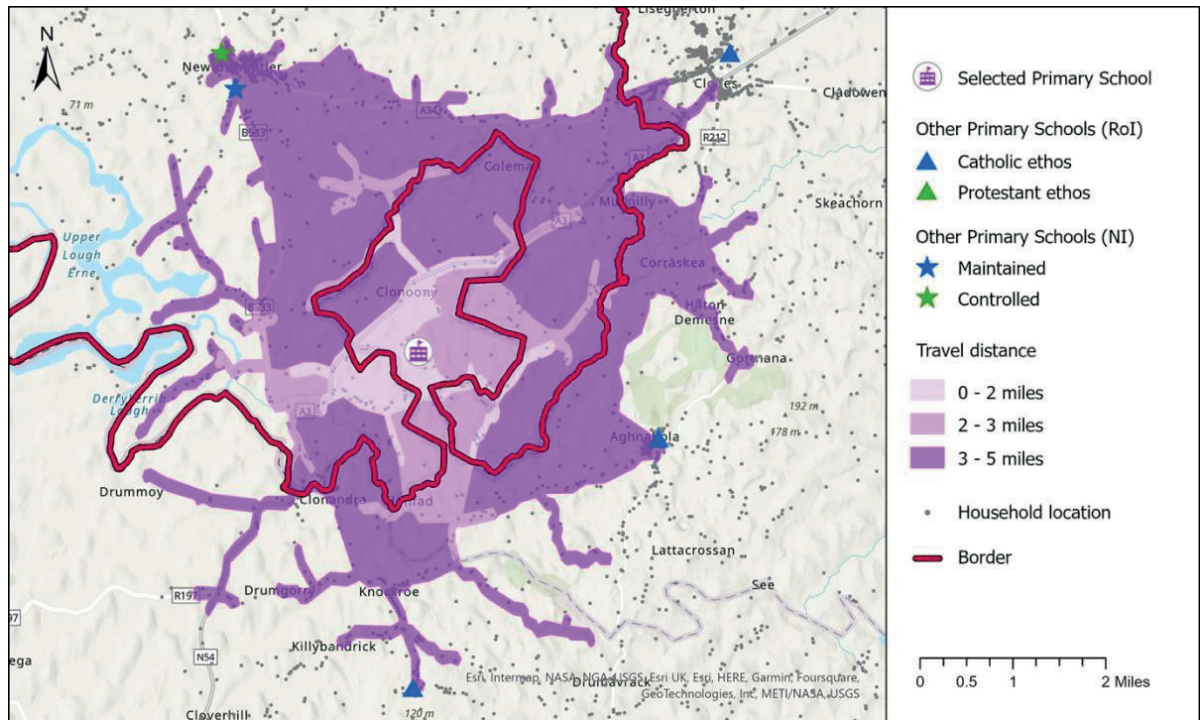
would not be straightforward, unless there were some reason for the parent to take that route to work, having childcare arrangements close to the school or some other personal reason to use it for their child’s education.

The numbers of schools with significant prospects of accessing pupils from households across the border are shown in Table 3. Of all schools, 40% are located in a position where there are no households from across the border within 3 miles travelling distance. This does not mean that potential learners could not attend such schools. Three miles is the average distance travelled to primary school in Ireland, not the maximum. Additionally, the location of family, or non-family childcare arrangements, may distort actual travel patterns. The other 60% of schools do have households across the border within 3 miles travelling distance. A quarter of the schools in this GIS analysis (14 schools out of 57 analysed) had over 10% of their accessible households, as defined by

the 3 miles travel distance, and 125 schools in the study areas had over 20% of their most accessible households located on the other side of the border. This would indicate that, for

many schools in border regions, the 'natural' catchment extends significantly across the border, and the sustainability of the school may rely on accessing pupils from those areas.

Map 3: One Republic of Ireland school's catchment highlighted with households shown.



Map 4: One Republic of Ireland school’s catchment highlighted with households shown

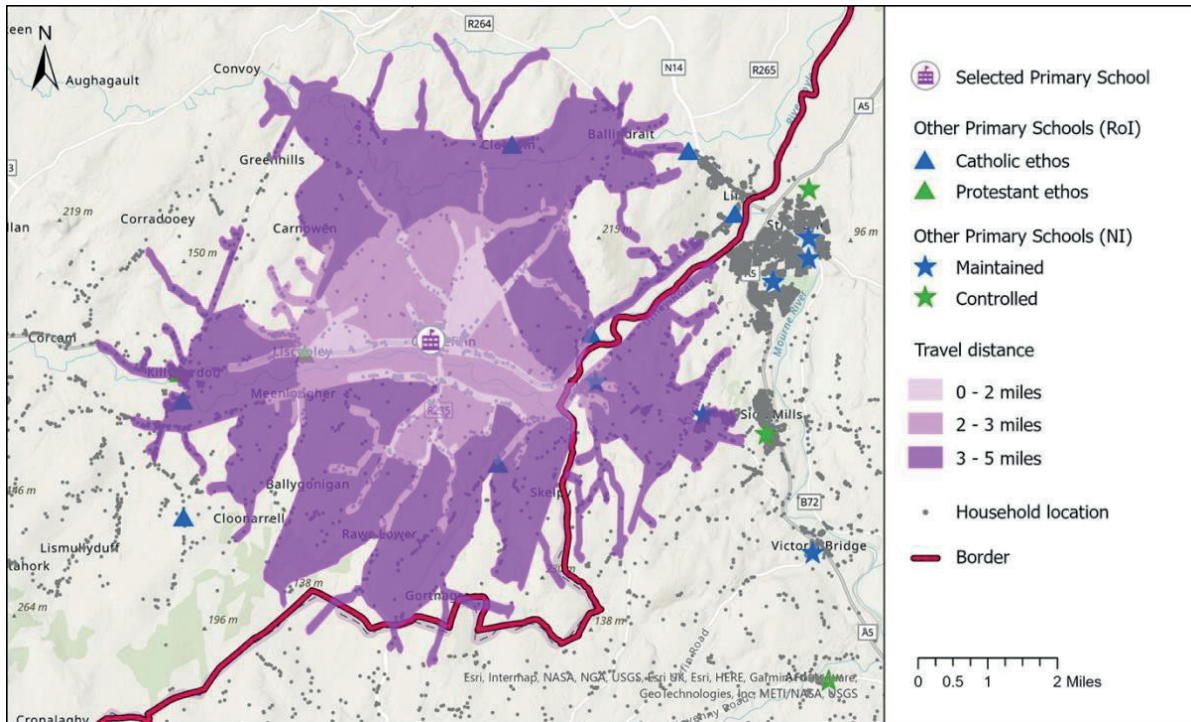


Table 3: Percentage of households within 3 miles travel on the other side of the border (school numbers)

	0	0.1-5.0	5.1-10.0	10.1-15.0	15.1-20.0	>20.0	Total
NI	39 (11)	36 (10)	0 (0)	18 (5)	0 (0)	7 (2)	100 (28)
Ireland	41 (12)	31 (9)	3 (1)	3 (1)	3 (1)	17 (5)	100 (29)
TOTAL	40 (23)	33 (19)	2 (1)	11 (6)	2 (1)	12 (7)	100 (57)

As Table 3 shows there were a number of schools whose 3 mile catchment did not include any households across the border, with an almost equal percentage in both NI (39%) and Ireland (41%). However, there is a higher proportion of those with greater than 20% of their accessible households over the border in Ireland (17% of Irish schools, compared to just 7% of NI schools). For 93% of NI schools, the limit is 15% or less, while 20% of Irish schools have higher proportions than this.

Table 4: Percentage of households within 3 miles travel on the other side of the border (school numbers)

		0	0.1-5.0	5.1-10.0	10.1-15.0	15.1-20.0	>20.0	Total
NI	Catholic Maintained Schools	65 (6)	29 (5)	0 (0)	24 (4)	0 (0)	12 (2)	100 (17)
	Other Maintained (Irish Medium)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (1)
	Controlled Schools	50 (5)	50 (5)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (10)
Ireland	Catholic Ethos schools	33 (8)	33 (8)	4 (1)	4 (1)	4 (1)	21 (5)	100 (24)
	Protestant ethos schools	80 (4)	20 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (5)
	TOTAL	40 (23)	33 (19)	2 (1)	11 (6)	2 (1)	12 (7)	100 (57)

Table 4 shows a breakdown by school ethos. In NI, Maintained primary schools have greater access to households across the border than Controlled schools, with 12% of Maintained schools having over 20% of households in Ireland within 3 miles of them. In contrast, no Controlled schools have more than 5% of households in Ireland within 3 miles travel. This pattern is even clearer in Ireland, with 21% of Catholic ethos schools having more than 20% of their accessible households in NI, while there are no Protestant ethos schools with easy access to more than 5% of NI households. This would suggest that Protestant ethos schools, whether in NI or in Ireland, are located further away from the border than Catholic ethos schools. It should be stressed that the numbers here are small and we have to be cautious not to infer too much from them.

2.4 Stage 1 structured interviews and listening events

The scoping conversations with school leaders and the listening events with community members were recorded, where permission was given. On those occasions when permission to record was refused, detailed notes were taken by the two researchers present at each scoping conversation or listening event. Where permission was given to record events, transcription software (Otter.ai) converted the recorded data into text, simultaneously. These transcriptions, consisting of over 18 hours of recordings, were checked for accuracy and corrected. Two of the research team then analysed the recordings and the notes from non-recorded events and classified them, initially into 31 categories.

Further categories later emerged although some categories subsequently coalesced. It is the analysis of those data which form the body of this section of the report.

2.5 Stage 1 online meetings with organisations, stakeholders and political representatives

Three online meetings were held at the end of Stage 1 with invited participants in order to provide background information about the project, present provisional findings from the Phase 1 structured interviews and listening events, and obtain feedback and suggestions which would inform the design of the survey in Phase 2 of the research. Each of these three meetings had a separate target audience. The first (26 Jan 2023) was an online workshop with individuals from

organisations that have a role representing the needs and interests of individuals living or working in border areas and would also have an interest in the project, for example: teacher unions, parent representative organisations, and organisations that work with and represent rural communities. This was the initial Reference Group meeting. The second (31 Jan 2023) was with individuals from the educational departments in each jurisdiction, the two management authorities in Northern Ireland (Education Authority and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools) and each of the management boards/associations in Ireland. This was the first Stakeholder Group meeting. The third (13 Feb 2023) in this series of online group meetings was with political representatives from both jurisdictions. Each of the online events lasted 1-1.5 hours and the main discussion points that emerged are highlighted at the end of section 3.6.

3. Results

3.1 Overview

This section will summarise the findings from Phase 1 of the research, comprising Community Listening Events and Scoping Conversations with school leaders. Many of the community respondents were parents and some were grandparents. Four Listening Events took place in Ireland, and five in Northern Ireland. All of these were conducted face to face between November 2022 and February 2023. Six were evening events, conducted in Community Centres or similar neutral local venues; the others took place in schools and Community Centres during the school day. The findings from scoping conversations with school leaders will also be discussed. These were almost all conducted face-to-face between November and December 2022. However, some were conducted via online conference calls, one in December 2022 and the other in January 2023, for two Principals who had been unable to meet in person. In all, 26 Principals were interviewed, with an equal number from Northern Ireland and Ireland (Table 5).

Table 5: Numbers of respondents

	Scoping conversations with Principals	Community Listening Events	Total
Ireland	13	6	19
NI	13	19	32
Total	26	25	51

Before the details of the Community Listening Events and the Principals’ Scoping Conversations are presented and discussed, an overview of the 26 schools involved may be useful. The small sample size must be taken

into account, as only a very small proportion of those schools located near the border could be visited over six days. Nonetheless, indicative trends may be apparent.

3.1.1 Schools and school leaders:

All of the 26 schools in this phase of the research were located within 5 miles, or 8km of the border. One was less than 300 metres away from the border, although 1.8km by road. Another was just 750 metres by road from the border. All of them were accessible by families on each side of the border. Of the 26 schools, eight were led by male Principals and 18 by females. Differences between the genders of school leaders North and South did not seem significant, with Ireland having 10 female school leaders, and three male, and Northern Ireland eight female school leaders and five male. A reasonable balance of schools was obtained with, in Northern Ireland, eight Catholic Maintained Primary schools and five Controlled Primaries and, in Ireland, nine Catholic ethos primary schools and four Protestant ethos primaries. The relatively large percentage of Protestant primaries, in a country in which 89% of primary schools are under the patronage of the Catholic church⁴³ may be a consequence of the combination of a border location, and the deliberate choice of border communities which had populations from both main traditions on both sides of the border.

3.1.2 School sizes:

Overall school sizes in terms of enrolment averaged 103 pupils but there was a considerable range, with 23% of schools having less than 30 pupils. The largest school had over 300 pupils, well ahead of all of the others. There was a considerable

⁴³ Roulston et al., 2023

difference between the school sizes in Ireland and Northern Ireland. The average primary school visited in Ireland was 45 pupils, and just two of the 13 schools exceeded 100 pupils. Protestant ethos primary schools in Ireland tended to be smaller than the average for the whole sample, with a mean enrolment of 23. In contrast, schools with a Catholic ethos averaged 59 pupils. In Northern Ireland, the average size of schools visited was 155 pupils. This average size was less than it would have been as a result of one anomalous school with a very low enrolment. Average enrolment numbers in Northern Ireland's Catholic Maintained and Controlled schools were similar (149 and 165 respectively), and just 3 schools visited were below the 105 threshold.

3.1.3 Changes in enrolment:

Across schools in both jurisdictions, in the period between 2015/16 and 2021/22, enrolments had fallen in 58% of our sample. This did not seem to be confined to the smaller schools – some relatively large schools had lost pupils in that time, and some very small schools had grown. However, small schools may be particularly vulnerable to enrolment variations and, in one case, a small school had lost half of its enrolment in that period. In Ireland, the drop in enrolment seemed more severe, with 69% of schools experiencing a falling enrolment while, in Northern Ireland, just 46% of schools were in that situation.

3.1.4 Challenges:

Gathering data along the border was not without some challenges. There was some suspicion voiced about the motivation for the research. At the time of the research field

visits, the Northern Ireland Protocol was a particularly contentious political issue and the issue of borders, whether in the Irish Sea or on the island of Ireland was being hotly debated. There had been calls for a referendum on Irish unity in the press,⁴⁴ and some communities may have been concerned that the work was in some way connected. Almost all Principals in the schools approached agreed to be interviewed but, even amongst those who agreed, a few were open about concerns before the interview began. Several were reluctant to be recorded, despite reassurances that this was for transcription purposes only. Some appeared nervous about their governors or the wider community being aware of their involvement in the research and required reassurance as to the anonymity of the work. There was one Principal who voiced concerns about the motives of the funder, the details and logo of which appeared on the documentation distributed to schools. Nonetheless, following reassurances, Principals were invariably open and generous with their time.

Community Listening Events were scheduled in early evening in venues selected for their community neutrality. One was held in Ireland and the other in Northern Ireland in each area visited, on subsequent evenings. These were poorly attended despite considerable attempts to publicise them through social media, and via the schools and pre-schools in the area. The research team considered the time of day, and the time of year, with dark evenings, and the impact of COVID-19 on people's willingness to attend a shared venue, and these may all be plausible contributors to the low levels of engagement. However, it was felt more likely that talking about

⁴⁴ See, for example, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/06/its-closer-now-than-its-ever-been-could-there-soon-be-a-united-ireland>

borders and communities and, potentially, a divided education system in a public event held in the locality might be challenging for many local people, particularly for those who may consider themselves members of a divided community, and one with a troubled past. Pragmatic decisions were made to supplement the low turnout at Listening Events with subsequent visits to access community respondents. This worked particularly well in visits to established groups, such as a mixed community craft group at one of the Community Centres, talking to parents in small groups before they picked their children up from school and talking to a range of Classroom Assistants, drawn from across the community. In that way, despite the challenges of hearing the community voice initially, we were able to triangulate the voices of school leaders, the literature and the views of the community itself.

3.2 Links with other schools, including cross-border links

Despite the proximity of many of the schools to schools just across the border, there was limited evidence of extant cross-border links. In some instances, there had been links in the past, but almost all of these seem to have lapsed.

When asked about cross-border links, one school leader said:

No, no, well, not really. Not in any significant way at the moment. There used to be shared education, which was a three-way process. Now we have significant shared education links with the Controlled school [which was nearby]. There would have been in the past different projects when you had the funding and the

international funding and things like that... we would have had the cross-border funds and all of those, but not in recent times... the funding is not there for it.

Principal, Maintained Primary school,
Northern Ireland

One school leader talked of the presence of extracurricular links, but these were not as strong as those with the neighbouring school in the village, and discussed the pressure on schools which limited those connections

... we would have our music teacher here, teaches music here and in [names of two school in Ireland] so she's going between so she brings the children from the different schools together for trad. groups and things like that. You know, that is something that has always happened and then the children from the schools come here for their tuition, you know their private music tuition so that they be in and out of the school. [Also, Gaelic] football yeah.... but you know, I can't say to you that we have good interconnections with the school not like we have here. And I suppose with demands and schools you know, you're you have so many boxes to kind of tick that's just one that we're haven't worked on.

Principal, Maintained Primary school,
Northern Ireland.

As religious parishes often do not reflect the political boundaries, some parish activities in Catholic ethos schools would bring together schools across the border but these seemed not, in our sample, to blossom into closer links.

We would be in the same parish, so first communion, confirmations... So you are linking up to square things, that'd be the main one there. You'd be in contact with the [other] Principals which is

always helpful. Whereas usually it is the sacraments that usually force you together. You're in the same parish, it's the same priest. He'd be going around the different churches and sharing news, printing booklets, wee things like that. But no, there's never been [shared events]...

Principal, Catholic ethos school, Ireland.

While many Principals voiced support for cross-border linkages and articulated the potential values of such collaboration, the challenges of applying for, and operating any school linkage was often voiced

I suppose you would love to do lots of things. But at the end of the day, you're just really busy. Yeah, absolutely.

Principal, Protestant ethos National School, Ireland.

Another Principal emphasised the benefits of contact for a small school

If you just keep to your own wee clique and don't look outside of, you're very isolated. So, kids here would go to things and they wouldn't even question that a child has a different religion. It wouldn't even be in their minds most of the time. Whereas we'll find and the teachers actually talked about that, the northern teachers like it was very much us and them. Because we're so small here if you don't look out you die sort of thing, it's more natural.

Protestant ethos Primary school, Ireland.

There were, however, some examples of links between schools in the same jurisdiction, although these seemed less common in NI. These links were often cross-community and, in Ireland, part of the Léargas programme (<https://www.leargas.ie/>). They served

to bring communities together, but also appeared to be valued in tackling some of the isolation that small schools sometimes experience.

We are in that shared education programme, the Léargas programme. So, we work with another small school in [nearby community] actually. And that works really, really well, we would have tried it in the past with a bigger school, a larger school a little bit further away. But there's something about the culture of a small school, so it's very hard to understand that if you're not part of us. And it works really well for us to be with another small school, because we just understand how the kids work and what they need. And I don't know... there's something different about it if you're on a larger school, I can hardly put my finger on it. But it works really well for us at the moment. And it's great. It's great for the kids to mix with kids in the local school. And to see that they're the same as us... that they do the same things as us... And I suppose it just diminishes a little bit... decreases that isolation.

Protestant ethos Primary school, Ireland

Another Principal explained in detail the advantages of such linkages

[Name of nearby Catholic ethos schools] is our partner school for shared education, we call it the Peace Project, through Léargas on our side, but I know in Northern Ireland, [it is referred] to as shared education... and we have been doing that for five years, so they're a partner school... a lot of their children would be from farming backgrounds, as well. And we have found that the children talking to each other realise, 'oh, my

daddy knows your daddy', 'my daddy drops silage for your daddy', and, you know, 'my daddy bought a bull from your daddy'. You know, there's lots of links there. And they realised, you know what, our parents know each other, because they're all farmers, you know... If you were in the middle of Derry or the middle of Belfast, it might not work as easily. Our parents here are fairly laid back, they are respectful of each other, they have relationships there already. So, I suppose it has made it easier for both our schools, like we have gone down to their school, and we have done ceilidh dancing, and we have done Gaelic [sports], which would be considered Catholic things, and they have come to us and their kids have done with our kids' pipeband drumming, you know, the Lambeg drum, and all that, which would be considered more Protestant, and Highland dancing through the Ulster Scots Agency. And we haven't had parents on either side complaining or saying, 'wait a minute here. What do you have our kids learning today?'

Protestant ethos Primary school, Ireland

3.3 Opportunities for schools/communities

The communities involved in the research demonstrated resilience and a capacity to adapt to the challenges of living in a border community. Some showed considerable evidence of change. One such community, with a long history of division and deeply affected by 'The Troubles', gave indications suggesting how this has changed. Friendships across the traditional divide appear to be easier to develop and sustain in some instances and mixed marriages, once relatively unusual, appear to be becoming more common.

Alternatively, there may be no increase in their incidence but it may be that it is more socially acceptable to be open about them.

I would be from a mixed relationship and we have kids but they don't know nothing really about 'The Troubles' and things like that... they probably wouldn't know to say "I'm Catholic or I'm Protestant"... but then I was brought up like that with my dad and mum and they were very relaxed, it didn't matter. But other families... that's up to them.

Respondent, Community Listening Event, Northern Ireland.

Residential divisions, once clearly demarcated in this community in earlier research, also appear to be breaking down.

For the likes of housing like [local name for housing estate], you know, growing up, like there's more mixed and through the [estate] I found. One [estate] would be one religion, another [estate] would be another.

Respondent, Community Listening Event, Northern Ireland.

Another respondent reflected on how communities reacted to cross-community friendships in the past, and how that appears to be changing in their community.

I would have had a hard time growing up in [name of community] if I had been out with friends from [name of housing area]. That would've been the Catholic part whenever I was growing up, you know, and then, you know, if you were about [name of community], you would have got a hard time with it... but things have changed.

Respondent, Community Listening Event, Northern Ireland.

The community was also divided in terms of services such as shops and public houses which earlier research had suggested was community-specific and rarely if ever accessed by the 'other'. There are suggestions that that pattern is beginning to change a little.

Respondent 1: Because you would go into certain shops, you wouldn't years ago and bars and things like that. Whereas years ago, you definitely would not...

Respondent 2: Yeah, I would feel comfortable, my dad was a plasterer and he would done work for anybody and he would have went into anywhere...

Respondent 1: In my teenage years we didn't go to those bars, right. So, I still wouldn't go to them, but that is just me.

Respondent 3: But then my sister then, she married somebody in the security forces. I think she would have a different idea even though we were brought up in the same house.

Respondents, Community Listening Event, Northern Ireland.

Thus, there is evidence that some members of the community, perhaps those closest to 'The Troubles' and who may have had their attitudes and their behaviours impacted by that experience, find social change of this kind more difficult than members of the community for whom the impact of 'The Troubles' has been somewhat less.

Living close to the border can offer greater choice to residents related to social outings, employment and retail, for instance, and also where might be chosen as a school for their children. For many parents, decisions about educational options for children appear to start even before primary school in the choice of pre-school provision. Many respondents

highlighted the importance of pre-school provision for the community and living on the border allowed some to make use of pre-school provision in another jurisdiction. This movement was more commonly from North to South in our study, to access longer pre-school provision.

...in the schools in early years education, you see a lot of the children from here going over the border because they're getting more access to longer support, so nine to three, or nine to four, whereas in the North here, we have very, very reduced hours of access to support. So, our playgroup here only runs from nine until half 11 and that's relatively new before that it was nine to 11. So, it's very rare. So, it means that parents here who are working, it's much more difficult for them to...

Respondent, Community Listening Event, Northern Ireland.

Changes in funding for pre-school places in Ireland were introduced relatively recently and free places are now available there. Before that, parents in Ireland often sent their children to Northern Ireland playschools, and some stayed on, at least for some time, in the adjoining primary schools in the north.

Respondent 1: One of my girls went there [a Primary school in Northern Ireland] for a year now from Play School. But then you can kind of have to weigh it all to see, where are you going to send them then afterwards?

Respondent 2: Mammy sent me to [name of village in NI, 2 miles away] Play School as well. Yeah, back in the day.

Researcher: Alright, so preschool in the North? And then back.

Respondent 3: Yeah, we also did that for our children. That was before the free places come in. Well, yeah, we all sent our children to [village name] to preschool in the North. And then they went to school here in the South

Researcher: And that's stopped now?

Respondent 3: That's stopped now because the free places that the government gave out...

Respondent 1: You get two years free pre-school now, in the South

Researcher: And when did that come in? A while back?

Respondent 2: It's four or five years.

Respondents, Community Listening Event, Ireland.

The consequence of the change in funding seems to have been a reversal of the direction of travel for pre-school education. One northern Principal explained the current movement:

I would safely say 60% of our P1 admissions all attend pre-school across the border. Because they offer the wrap-around care, they offer the longer hours and significantly, not all the children that would be coming here get places in the.. playgroup [the local pre-school provision]... so most... 60 or 70% of our P1 admissions come from the preschool provision across the border, so they live in the north, they go to preschool in the south and they come back to primary here.

Principal, Maintained Primary school, Northern Ireland.

In terms of primary education, one Principal estimated

we have about 20% of our children will be from the South

Principal, Maintained Primary School, Northern Ireland,

This movement of pupils was identified as a vital factor in keeping this school, located very close to the border, sustainable. It should be noted that this Principal's estimated numbers from across the border attending this school alone constitutes well over 50% of the total number of those officially attending education in Northern Ireland with addresses in Ireland (see DENI figures in 1.4), suggesting that the official figures are an underestimate of the movement of pupils.

Thus, decisions about whether to attend primary schools in the North or the South are influenced by policy decisions on both sides of the border. However, they also seem to entail parents along the border considering long-term educational and life goals, with a view to selecting particular post-primary schools and even with thoughts about Further and Higher Education in mind.

The reasons advanced for selecting a particular school varied. Some respondents considered opportunities for further training after post-primary school are better in Northern Ireland. One Principal, when considering why some of her pupils in Ireland might chose a post-primary school in Northern Ireland, reflected that perception:

I would see it personally that the opportunities for further training, not university based, are better in the North than out here. You know... the pathway afterwards. So possibly some of these families are choosing that.

Principal, National School, Ireland.

One parent living in Ireland suggested some perceived pressures about selecting an educational pathway across the border from where a child lived, in case it restricted choices later

I think it leaves them limited as well [if they take a Northern Ireland educational pathway] when they go to university that they can't... they have to stick then to going to the North or going to the UK whereas if you are out here, you go then when it comes to university, go to Dublin, Galway... they can go North or South.

Respondent, Community Listening Event, Ireland.

This also illustrates the long-term thinking and aspirations of parents deciding on pathways for their children when they are three or four years of age.

Equally there were many pragmatic short-term decisions to be made. As families may have close links with a settlement or a townland on the other side of the border, and may in fact have had that as their home and with parents or other family still living there, these linkages remain strong.

[We have] parents who have maybe lived in [nearby village in NI], who've moved maybe across the border, but this was their school to come back or there's grandparents for childcare that's here. And that's why they still use this school rather than another school.

Principal, Catholic ethos Primary, Ireland.

There are also large numbers of parents who cross the border in both directions to work, and this journey may make school choice in the other jurisdiction more attractive. With cross-border work commonplace for many families, it is not surprising that education is also considered on a cross-border basis.

I'd say a lot of our parents and where I come from, the border is in terms of work and everything an irrelevant thing. I mean, it's not irrelevant if you're going to be stopped, which in the past was [the case], but personally in my own family, I work here, my sister works in the health service in Dundalk, my older sister works in Dublin University, and my first sister's husband works in the airport in Dublin. So they're going South, every day or whatever... that would be representative of the area we live in

Principal, Maintained Primary School, Northern Ireland. Another pointed out that the movement was in both directions

There'd be people who are leaving here and going to work in the South... certain jobs in the South and then you'd... vice versa... have the same the other way around.

Principal, Maintained Primary School, Northern Ireland.

It should be emphasised that not every school had experience of pupils who crossed the border to attend school. One respondent who had been Principal in his school, just a few miles from the border, for almost 20 years said:

...crossing the border to go to school, I've maybe had one child who has done that and that's because they're relocating - maybe moved to [a town across the border], so it just doesn't happen. It's non-existent.

Principal, Maintained Primary School, Northern Ireland.

Staff also cross the border in some schools, living in one jurisdiction, but working in another.

Yes, we have a number of staff [who cross the border], teachers from classroom assistants and kitchen staff

Principal, Maintained Primary School,
Northern Ireland.

I have one classroom assistant who lives in the South. There's doesn't seem to be any difficulty...

Principal, Controlled Primary School,
Northern Ireland.

In at least one school visited the Principal herself lived on the other side of the border from the school she led.

Other schools have less experience of cross-border movement of staff

Researcher: So, there's that bit of movement of pupils across the border. What about staff, do you know?

Principal: No, we don't.

Researcher: Never have? Or as far as you know?

Principal: Not for any... Well, we would have had actually, the Principal release teacher that was here years ago, her husband was a Presbyterian minister in [county in Ireland] and she would have done Principal release here. She was a trained teacher, trained in the North. Our NISTRA system which is the substitute teacher register, I actually don't know whether there are teachers from the South on that, we just have to take them from the pool of teachers in the North and I actually don't know.

Principal, Controlled Primary School,
Northern Ireland.

One Principal with no experience of cross-border staff, despite having pupils who crossed the border to attend the school, speculated whether there was an issue with recognition of qualifications.

Principal: Our staff are from right here? Yeah...

Researcher: Has that always been the case, as far as you know?

Principal: In my time... I'm here 10 years. Yeah. So

Researcher: I wonder why learners would cross but staff maybe not so much?

Principal: Maybe because of qualifications. You know, maybe they have different qualifications or they have... they don't apply for... I haven't had anyone from across the border apply for any positions within the school. There's been no, you know, there's been no reason that they wouldn't.

Principal, Maintained Primary School,
Northern Ireland.

Another had no experience of permanent staff but had substitute teachers, known colloquially as 'subs', who had gained their teaching qualification from the other jurisdiction:

We don't, no [have staff who live across the border]. No, we don't. I am a mile from the border. But in [name of county in Ireland], [former Principal's name] lived in this locality, but southern... so no we don't... we have had people sub who are northern trained, and are vetted for here.

Principal, Catholic ethos National School,
Ireland.

It was noted that the population in many of the areas visited moved within the local area relatively fluidly, migrating across the border perhaps multiple times during their lives. They may have grown up on one side of the border but found a site on which to build a house on the other side. While they may raise their family there, they would continue to retain strong family and friendship links on the other side of the border, and these may be utilised for childminding, for example. Close links with their 'home' place will be retained. Equally, they might work on one side of the border or another, and socialising and shopping may take place on either side. For such individuals and communities, the border is, to all intents and purposes, non-existent. This also applies to education to a large degree and many of those who have moved house across the border may still prefer to use the school that they and their family have used for generations. Equally, they are in a position to access educational opportunities on either side of the border that is advantageous to them. For instance, if pre-school education in Ireland offers greater opportunities, families living in NI may make use of that, but use primary schools in NI. Equally, where opportunities favour a movement in the other direction, that may be the pattern that prevails.

...once they get into P1, there's an influx of the children who first of all, live in the town who have been going over the border for early years support but then a lot of children coming over the border that might have family from within the area then obviously have to have an address where they can go to the school. So, what it's bringing then to see people coming together and it's, you see a lot of historical [links]... families who have been in the area for a very long time continue to bring their children back here now.

Principal, Maintained Primary school,
Northern Ireland.

3.4 Challenges for schools/communities

There are several challenges that schools and communities face living in rural border communities. These include rurality and isolation, depopulation and outmigration, lack of transport and healthcare infrastructure and disparities and uncertainties in education systems across jurisdictions.

3.4.1 Rurality, isolation, outmigration, depopulation

A recurring challenge highlighted by school principals and respondents from community listening events was the challenge with rurality and isolation, of their location.

The downside of our community is, you don't have a lot of shops, for instance, and you need a car if you are going to go anywhere, because you can't rely on public transport here, so those sort of isolated things can be difficult for the community.

Principal, Maintained Primary School,
Northern Ireland.

The isolation of rural border communities is contributing to the decline in population numbers. School Principals have expressed their concern with declining enrolment numbers being observed within their school communities. One noted that all four schools within their locality have been experiencing a consistent decline in enrolment in recent years.

In the past seven, or eight years, the numbers that are attending our four parish schools have dramatically declined.

Principal, Catholic ethos primary, Ireland.

A recurring challenge highlighted by several Principals and by respondents during community listening events was the ongoing outmigration of the working-age population. This age group emigrate, take up a profession, settle down and rarely return home. One community member highlighted in some cases when there is farmland and a homestead within the family, young males will take employment abroad, rent out the farmland and leave the homestead behind, perhaps unoccupied, causing a change to the landscape of this rural community.

A lot of young males have emigrated and settled down with their families in Australia, New Zealand or England, and never really came back and fully settled here...even though they're farmers, they let the land and they're collecting the money and are quite happy away somewhere else and not necessarily away farming, maybe they have gone on and taken up a profession, but the land is at home kept in the family name....the homestead is generally just left behind.

Community Listening Event, Ireland.

Another school Principal highlighted that migration may well be an issue, but the dynamics of family life have also changed within these communities, with couples choosing to have children later in life often resulting in smaller family sizes.

Migration is a problem in this area, but it is also the fact that people are having fewer children, and smaller families and having them later in life as well.

Principal, Protestant ethos School, Ireland.

Whilst these communities are experiencing some typical challenges commonly experienced by the effects of rurality and isolation, these rural communities have an additional challenge due to being located within close proximity of an international border. Brexit was highlighted as a factor that could threaten enrolment numbers of already small schools. The uncertainty surrounding Brexit for Foreign Nationals has caused a few families to return to their home country.

Brexit has had an impact on our numbers. We have seen just a little drip of people returning home, going back to Poland and Lithuania. We had last year, six children whom we expected to see through primary school leave to go home, and the reason they gave was that they didn't know what the future was holding. The crisis in Ukraine has had a significant impact as well because people have been unsettled, the attendance rate of our children with English as an additional language has dropped.

Principal Maintained Primary School, Northern Ireland.

Another Principal highlighted the potential impact of losing one or two families for an already small school

[We] would have, have some people [return to their original countries], you know, what, not huge numbers. But I mean, in our school it makes a huge difference to us to have if we have five children, it's five that we wouldn't have had. And when you're a very small school as we are, yeah, that's our worry, as you know, is that we need more population in the area for ourselves.

Principal Maintained Primary School, Northern Ireland.

3.4.2 Transport

Transport is a challenge for communities and for schools. Some of this is a result of being rural and isolated. One Principal noted that public transport is basically non-existent in their area, and this has had a negative effect on some families trying to access support services in other towns.

Transport is probably the biggest issue for families, it is a huge issue here. We had a family have a traumatic event and they needed to use a service in a different town, but they had no way to get there... they needed public transport but there is none. It is poor in the towns but is basically non-existent in the countryside.

Principal, Catholic ethos School, Ireland.

The peripheral location of these communities at a border may be contributing to this challenge also, with Principals struggling in some instances to access cross-border transport for school trips.

Going for trips across the border is quite a difficult scenario because it requires booking separate buses as EA [Education Authority] buses have issues with insurance...we had a class trip recently and schools from the South didn't have to pay to enter the park, but we did.

Principal, Controlled Primary School, Northern Ireland.

Segregation in the use of school transport is common for post-primary pupils but buses tend to be shared by pupils from all primary schools.

I know we share our buses or share with [neighbouring Controlled Primary]. You know, some of the buses are shared here, and they always have been.

Principal, Maintained Primary School, Northern Ireland.

Another deplored the segregation in buses for older learners

We'd have a little bit of trouble on the buses but not the level we used to have... they share... well the primary school kids do, there may be active segregation in secondary school which is bonkers... Yeah, I mean, we're talking Sharpeville [a location in South Africa which epitomised apartheid] here, you should be able to get a bus and feel safe.

Principal, Maintained Primary School, Northern Ireland.

Even though free school transport was available in NI, there was an instance of a school where no parents could make use of it because of the location of the school. In cases where other schools of a similar type were situated nearby, just beyond the two-mile limit after which free school transport is provided, for practical purposes, no parents in that school could access free transport as most pupils living over two miles from the school are actually closer to alternative provision.

We have no buses even from the North. Because our children must be able to say what, what I'd say a two-mile radius from the primary school. So, if you step outside the two-mile radius here, you're in [nearby village]. Well, the nearest school of type is [school in that village], so those children now can't get a bus. So, we're caught... the last family we had were actually down towards the [Irish] border and slipped

off a wee road down there and we were the closest school of type. They actually removed EA transport but provided them monies for the transport either for themselves or to pay a local taxi firm. We have nobody going by bus [now] so you can see our location. [Another village name] is a mile away...we're in the middle of nowhere on the main road.

Principal, Maintained Primary School, Northern Ireland.

The challenges of limited public transport in rural areas were also highlighted, particularly for accessing healthcare and for work

Transport is huge issue here... there is still people that don't drive, you know so, you know, that is that's a huge issue here as public transport because there is none, there's none. It is poor in the towns and it's basically non-existent in the countryside.

Principal, Catholic ethos School, Ireland.

3.4.3 Disparity between education systems and variation in support for pupils

The differences that exist between education systems in each jurisdiction make the exchange of pupils and the availability of statutory support difficult. In particular, the age of school transfer is different between jurisdictions, and there are uncertainties about the support services that schools can access if they have a pupil who lives in a different jurisdiction.

If a parent wishes for their child to transfer from a primary school in one location to a post-primary school in the other, there are several difficulties in doing so. In Ireland, children leave primary school aged 12, compared to Northern Ireland where children

leave primary school aged 11. School leaders highlighted that, if a parent wishes their child to attend a post-primary school in Northern Ireland, for example, they often take their child out of the Irish school one year early. This creates challenges regarding curriculum completion, declining numbers of sixth class in Ireland, and also in terms of school readiness for the child.

Our fifth and sixth class is a two-year curriculum...if they leave early there is no sense of school completion...this is a Catholic school, so they would receive their Confirmation in sixth class...

Principal, Catholic ethos School, Ireland.

Realistically we can't fit a two-year fifth class and sixth class curriculum into one year...it's mostly the Maths curriculum that you find that there's an issue with because it is very heavy.

Principal Catholic ethos School, Ireland.

Alternatively, if a child completely finishes their primary education in Ireland, there may be issues on transfer.

We find that if a child stays with us until sixth class and then transfers to a post-primary school in Northern Ireland, they almost go into that school too old...we believe it is hugely problematic for a child to do this...the parents don't want them to leave this school a year early...but they feel they have to in order to get into the post-primary school.

Principal, Catholic ethos School, Ireland.

An additional challenge of cross-border transfer is the uncertainty of support services that schools can avail of if they have a child enrolled with an address from the other jurisdiction. A Principal from Northern

Ireland whose catchment spanned the border reported that a child must be registered with a GP in the same jurisdiction as the school, in order for the family, school and child to avail of support services from the Education Authority.

If we had a child come [from over the border] with autism, with extreme needs, we would have no support at all for that child...we couldn't manage it...if we had a child with needs like that, we just couldn't do it. We would be dependent on the school budget to pay for a classroom assistant, but then we wouldn't have the EA [Education Authority] support either... we really couldn't [provide a Classroom Assistant] and we would be depending on the services to make that diagnosis for us as well.

Principal, Controlled Primary School,
Northern Ireland.

Similarly, when routine vaccination programmes are deployed through schools, there are uncertainties about what children from another jurisdiction can access.

If for example they're using a Southern address and coming here, what medical facilities can we use when there are medical vaccines offered through the school from the Department of Health here? Will those children be able to avail of those same vaccines even though they wouldn't be registered?

Principal, Maintained Primary School,
Northern Ireland.

3.4.4 Healthcare

There are some specific challenges regarding access to healthcare which are unique to these rural border communities. In some cases, it may be more practical to access healthcare across the border, and in some emergency circumstances this may be necessary.

It is absolutely shocking in my opinion, that if a child takes sick, really seriously ill, three minutes from here, they have to travel further to Dublin to get the care that they need, whereas if they're on this side of the border..., they're taken to Belfast.

Principal, Maintained Primary School,
Northern Ireland.

Disparities in healthcare provision across the border were raised frequently, and this sometimes caused issues and posed challenges for school leaders.

We have quite a few families in school who would have you know, born and reared in [name of local village] and they're just living in and around the area [including over the border] it's just, it's everyday life and then I think the whole doctors' issue as well. You know, people want to be in the medical system in the north, and it's registering with the doctor here so they can use the pharmacy, never more apparent than during COVID When we were having the free COVID test and the pharmacy and they were coming from the south to the north and queuing up so they could get the free COVID test. But it's unbelievable how people literally, you know, 10 metres apart are treated so differently. You know, it's just, it's the systems...

Principal, Maintained Primary School,
Northern Ireland.

There seem to be occasions when parents in Ireland are unaware that primary schools in NI are accessible to them, unless fully subscribed, and that may contribute to a number of parents who utilise addresses in NI, often of family members, to access services there,

There's the belief that schools [that] you can't attend to school here unless you have a northern address, that you're from the North. Parents don't fully understand that they could do, that there is a loophole, whereby they get access from the South and use their southern address and come to here, but that can only happen on the auspices that we are not full with children from the North.

Principal, Maintained Primary School,
Northern Ireland.

Principals can be asked to provide official confirmation of addresses, which often places them in a difficult position.

We do have a situation here where we have parents who use northern addresses [but who are believed to reside in Ireland] and request me to fill in forms when the children are in here to indicate that the children reside here

Principal, Maintained Primary School,
Northern Ireland.

We have had many children who live across the border that come here... and because of the admissions process and schools in Northern Ireland, it's so strict, and it's the proof of address and a proof of residency. And we still get that from those people. And unless you know you get in a car every evening and follow them home and see where they're tucked in, you can't actually prove that they don't live at the place that they say they live at. So there, it's like the

nanny's [grandmother's] address. There are people... instinctively we probably know that this is happening. But you can't question documentation if someone [is meeting] your admissions criteria, they have the documentation you know, they're entitled to the place within your school.

Principal, Maintained Primary School,
Northern Ireland.

3.4.5 Requirement for Irish

In Ireland it is a requirement that teachers have a qualification in Irish, and this can pose a challenge for the movement of teachers, particularly those from a Northern Unionist background, as Controlled schools in Northern Ireland seldom, if ever, offer Irish as a curriculum option. It is, however, a compulsory part of the primary school curriculum in Ireland, which can also be an issue for some parents supporting their children's homework, but with limited knowledge of the language.

Irish that's a big one for people to get their head round. And especially in the Protestant community. That can be difficult for some people, you know, from a political point of view, and then other people just embrace it and get on with it. They have to do it. But even talking to colleagues in Roman Catholic schools, there is a lot of negativity around Irish, in general. Yeah. Now obviously, there's a huge amount of positivity as well, but there's quite a lot of negativity as well. You know, I've been told 'my daddy said throw that book in the fire', you know, stuff like that. So, it's challenging then for parents who are doing Irish homework with their children, so we've had to adapt and help them out nearly as well as their children.

Protestant ethos Principal, Ireland.

...maybe those [teachers seeking employment in Ireland] who came from the South, you know, had Irish language at school so maybe that was enough for them to be able to [take up a post].

Controlled school Principal, Northern Ireland.

In a discussion about the mobility of teachers across the border, there was some uncertainty about the qualifications required.

I know probably with teachers in the North, who are qualified, I don't know in Southern schools you need Irish or you need [it], you know, to be able to teach in the schools in the South. So, that's maybe... I don't know, maybe that might be different in the Catholic schools. I really don't know.

Controlled school Principal, Northern Ireland.

3.4.6 Newcomers

As the areas visited were deliberately chosen for their rural status, the research team did not expect large numbers of newcomers, as they might be expected to gravitate to urban centres where accommodation and employment should be easier to find. Some communities did report that there were no newcomers in their area, particularly where employment was centred around farming. One respondent, asked about newcomers, noted that

Doesn't seem to have happened here. Yeah. No, definitely not. I think I suppose maybe they don't have the skills. You know, they don't I suppose a lot of newcomers that are coming in maybe the countries that are coming from maybe their farming methods would be [different]. But

ours here are more machine orientated now.

Community Listening Event, Northern Ireland.

A Principal commented

We don't have any newcomers and again in my 21 years here, I think we've had about three families and they don't stay you know very long. I suppose [name of village] is too quiet and that, you know, supermarkets are that wee bit further away, but no, we generally wouldn't have a lot of newcomers. I suppose they go where there's employment is as well so generally the towns would be the attraction for them.

Maintained School Principal, Northern Ireland.

Other communities, particularly those with agricultural processing employment, did have considerable numbers of newcomers. In many cases where there were newcomers, they were family groups, so would have made use of local schools and become integrated into the local community. One Principal, whose proportion of newcomers was 42% of her school's enrolment, commented

Our Polish community... they're here a long time as are our Lithuanian community and then the Bulgarians have been here a long time, but only in the last, since post-COVID, the Roma Bulgarian community has started to come in to [name of village]. Prior to COVID we didn't have Roma Bulgarians with one or two here and there. So, I don't know why they have started to come so much.

Principal, Maintained Primary, Northern Ireland.

One parent celebrated the value of the diversity that newcomers brought to the area, particularly evident perhaps in a rural setting.

The demographic in the school has changed massively. I think there's now seven... there's seven languages that are spoken in the school now by different children, and different members of staff. And that's really, really exciting because it feels like my children will come home and they'll occasionally say a word like 'that means such as such, my friend taught me that'. And that's not something that I ever thought moving to [name of village] that my children would have.

Community Listening Event, Northern Ireland.

One Principal noted that she had very few newcomer pupils, and that they tended to attend a neighbouring school, something ascribed to the religious background of many of the newcomers.

Mostly newcomers would be of the Catholic religion, so we don't have actually at the minute have any newcomers in school, you know because most of them are off a Catholic faith and would go to the Catholic school and then if they are living across there [in Ireland], you know, they go to school across there, you know so... the majority of the newcomers... they're very welcome to come but you know, we don't say you can't come here, but most of them, you know, will go to the Maintained school.

Principal, Controlled school, Northern Ireland.

3.4.7 Brexit

The uncertainty following the UK's withdrawal from the European Union may have had an impact on border communities, but for many respondents, it was not a major influence on their everyday concerns. A Principal noted that

I don't think the fear is there as much as there was before Brexit happened as such, you know?

Principal, Catholic ethos school, Ireland.

However, at least initially, there were fears about employment and mobility, especially within communities who had become used to no barriers in movement. One community member shared her initial worries:

I think that was one of the biggest fears with Brexit is 'would I be able to work over the border?' and 'If I'm not able to work over the border, where am I going to work and how are my children going to be able to go to school and what ...what will chase me and what's the long-term plan around that?' That was the biggest fear back at the time and I think now the day-to-day part of it has dissipated.

Community Listening Event, Northern Ireland.

Brexit also seems to have had an impact on some parents' continued concerns about accessing educational opportunities across the border. One Principal describes an encounter with parents concerning the impact of Brexit

... like the two parents that I have had coming to me in the past year and say, "Can I enrol my child here? I'm from [village name in NI] or, you know, my address is County [name of county in NI]. Like, what do I have to do... have we to do something to get to come to school here?",

and the answer is “no, you don’t have to do anything. You just need to fill in an enrolment form and come on ahead, you know, get yourself a uniform.” You know, so I don’t like it [Brexit] hasn’t had, it hasn’t had a negative impact. on us. And as I say, I think if anything, it’s probably kept families that historically would have went to the North to secondary school. It has definitely kept some of them in the South.

Principal, Catholic ethos Primary school, Ireland.

The beneficial impact on some schools in Ireland as a result of Brexit were echoed by another Principal.

I think if anything, it’s probably kept more children from the South in the South at school. You know, because they’re afraid of going across the border to school, and then all of a sudden, maybe having to pay fees or, you know, just worried about what the future... worried about the unknown I suppose, really.

Principal, Catholic ethos primary, Ireland.

One impact of Brexit that some Principals raised was the potential of losing some young families in the area, and the disproportionate impact that could have on already small schools.

But I mean, in our school it makes a huge difference to us to have if we have five children, it’s five that we wouldn’t have had. And when you’re a very small school as we are, yeah, that’s our worry, as you know, is that we need more population in the area for ourselves.

Principal, Maintained primary school, Northern Ireland.

Another commented, linking Brexit, the war in Ukraine and COVID-19 as factors contributing to population loss.

Brexit has had an impact on our numbers. We have seen just a little drip of people returning home, going back to Poland, going back to Lithuania... in fact, last year six children who we expected to see through primary school left to go home. And the reason they gave was “we don’t know what the future is holding”. The crisis in Ukraine has had significant impact as well, because people have been unsettled... our attendance rate on our children with English as an Additional Language has dropped. They have taken extended holidays in the European countries that they’re from because have missed their families through COVID, the pandemic, and then with Brexit, Ukraine, they’ve been... that feeling of being unsettled.

Principal, Maintained school, Northern Ireland.

Another was concerned about the impact that process would have on her enrolment

[A concern] for this school is that the non-English-speaking children, those families are going to stop coming. If they if they’re worried about their family at home if they’re worried about Brexit, if they’re worried about their residency, all of those issues that they have in the back of their mind, because of that will our intake will significantly drop?

Principal, Maintained school, Northern Ireland.

Others, particularly in Ireland, seemed a little less fearful of the impact on their community, feeling that any negative outcomes of Brexit, including on school numbers would be confined to Northern Ireland

I don't think the fear is there as much as there was before Brexit happened as such, you know? I don't think Brexit was ever going to do us any harm. I think if anything it would have done the other side of the border more harm.

Principal, Catholic ethos primary, Ireland.

3.5 Potential post-COVID changes

While there were challenges raised by the border communities, these were clearly mixed with opportunities. One opportunity seemed to be a very recent development, with the rise of working from home which has been experienced across the world following the experience of home-working during COVID-19.

A number of respondents felt that this could change the underlying processes which militated against population growth in these peripheral communities. A Principal said

Do you know what, if you drive to [local landmark], you are 50 minutes to Belfast, Lisburn or whatever, you know, everything is very accessible. But you need the connectivity, a lot of people working from home, you know, I know a few people who live in big houses and they work from home, in quite high jobs but they work from home. They love the rural and they can still get in the car and be in Belfast or be in the airport or Dublin.

Principal, Controlled primary, Northern Ireland.

However, any post-COVID resurgence would only be possible with high-speed broadband, and some areas pointed to real problems, even with mobile phone connections.

Respondent 1: [My husband, when working from home over COVID] had to drive down the road and park to get phone coverage. It's terrible. We have no mobile coverage here in the school.

Respondent 2: I have to go on to UK 4G out there... or 3G

Respondent 1: You have to out there to the gates before you get coverage on your mobile

Respondent 3: Where I live down there... for us to get coverage from the South, we have to go to the kitchen. But go to the sitting room for on the northern coverage... walk from one room to the other.

Respondent 1: Our living room and the kitchen is the Southern and the rest of the Northern network... the rest of the house. So you're roaming all the time.

Respondent 2: So the high speed broadband [extends] only as far as the school... anywhere else around does not have high speed broadband...

Respondent 1: ...although there are plans to extend that

Respondent 3: In 2028, or something like that... So, you can see that that's a problem. Community Listening Event, Ireland.

3.6 Key points that emerged from the online discussions with organisations, stakeholders and political representatives

These events provided an opportunity to hear from participants about the extent to which our preliminary findings related to the experiences of their members and the communities which they represented. Discussion points from the first event included challenges facing teachers from the North who were unable to apply or take up posts in the South because they did not have an Irish language qualification. Differences in the teaching qualifications / designation as primary or post- primary teacher between the two jurisdictions were also highlighted.

One participant emphasised the need to consider the increased pressures in border areas on school leaders and to examine how they could best be supported by sharing good practice, for example through networks and clustering of small schools in border areas. Challenges relating to rural depopulation

were also highlighted, and the relationship between school sustainability and community sustainability. An increased interest in working from home following the COVID-19 pandemic was regarded as having the potential to lead to an increased population in some rural border locations. Other challenges that were discussed centred on transport in rural border areas, dwindling funding opportunities for community organisations, and a perceived lack of political engagement and support in issues affecting border communities. Participants welcomed the research:

I think there's huge learning from your research ... we can really, really learn from each other and try and move things along.

Another participant commented on the value of the 'community-focused' approach of the project as this was broader than a school-based approach which could include parents and families who potentially did not feel there was school provision in the area that aligned with their preferences:

I think that listening community listening, element of the project is really, really important to also get that perspective from outside the school communities.

Table 6: Numbers of participants

	Representative organisations event (Reference Group)	Educational stakeholder event (Stakeholder Group)	Political representative event	Total
Ireland	8	4	4	16
NI	8	8	14	30
Total	16	12	18	46

In addition to learning about the project and responding to the preliminary findings from the first phase of the work, participants also had the opportunity to contribute their suggestions for the border survey that were to be undertaken in Phase 2 of the project. A screen shot of one of the JamBoard pages from this collaboration is presented below. In addition to informing the survey design, the feedback from these events also helped to shape the Community Conversations in Phase 3 of the project.

The second event was with educational stakeholders and, as with the first event, there was excellent support for and interest in the project. Following the presentation from the project team, points that emerged from the discussion included curricular differences North and South and a desire to

see more work on this; the need to explore disadvantage and different strategies on each side of the border for tackling disadvantage, particularly in relation to education; the extent to which academic selection might be influencing parental decisions about what school to send their child to; and the challenges relating to a lack of structural work being done to try and align school transport, SEN (Special Educational Needs) and FSM (Free School Meals) entitlements in each jurisdiction.

The final event in this initial series of online workshops and meetings was with political representatives. This included those who represented border communities as well as those who held an education brief or responsibility within their political party. There was very strong interest in the project from

Google Jamboard display of responses from workshop, 26 January 2023

Suggestions for border survey, CiPP project (continued on page 2)

The Jamboard contains the following suggestions:

- Voice of all stakeholders in the community**
- Specific pressures on school leaders**
- Parental views on what they would like for the future**
- Do schools cluster their parent communities? Eg: parents from larger schools volunteering in smaller schools?**
- How can the strength of community involvement, resilience and local expertise be optimised to benefit the challenges schools experience?**
- How can we future proof our smaller schools?**
- Can the views of children be explored?**
- Look at those who have returned to these areas and focus on the why, can this information be used to encourage others home.**
- Why is choice so important. Good schools are what should be the focus**
- Are all religious needs being met with educational provision in this area?**
- What are the particular challenges for border schools in terms of the relationship between schools and parents? Is there good parental engagement in education/school life**
- Rural schools are so important - we should look at the pressures on school leaders**
- Do / would parents/families cross the border to attend school? After school? Child-care? Children's activities or clubs? Why/why not?**
- Parental views on if there is a link between the choice of pre-school & primary school**
- where a child is not attending the nearest primary school to home, what is the reasons for this?**
- Should we consider a minimum viable size for schools?**
- Supports for children with additional needs. Parents and schools alike often have to work hard to access the right supports. Are there opportunities here?**
- Is there a need for n/s coordination in planning for specialised/non-mains tream placements for children with SEN. E.g. base classes, special classes or special schools**
- I think we need a focus on rural transport links which tend to be awful**
- Wifi connectivity and digital infrastructure development**

participants, and the issues which emerged in the discussion included the need to develop an evidence base relating to the educational outcomes of small schools; problems relating to poor rural transport provision in some border areas; a discussion around how decisions are made in relation to school closures; difficulties experienced in some areas with regard to teacher recruitment; SEN provision; and under-funding of pre-school provision. A strong partnership model was advocated as being the way forward, where small schools work together in learning communities. The importance of the school as a community resource was also emphasised and the value in opening schools up more as community venues.

4. Conclusion

This first phase of the Communities in Partnership Project suggests that these under-researched border communities in Ireland have many of the same issues as many other rural communities across the island. These centre around isolation, population decline and access to services and employment. However, overlying these common challenges are unique problems associated with living on or near a border which has gained increased significance since Brexit. While the impact of that decision was not reported as high on the day-to-day agenda of many individuals, nonetheless it has had and continues to have an impact. This is particularly the case for those communities who had newcomer families who contributed to the local economy and used services, including schools.

Other issues including disparities in education policy, connectivity including broadband, and a legacy of division and conflict impact upon these communities. Division particularly may have contributed to a reluctance, in some contexts, to engage publicly with the research. Phase 2 of the research, which involves an anonymous online survey, was envisaged as a mechanism to get a further insight into the challenges and opportunities faced by these border communities. This is designed to provide them with a voice to allow them to articulate those factors which affect their lives, and the strategies that they have developed to address them.

Phase 2:

Online Survey

Report Completed: July 2023

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1. Background

An online survey was designed using JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) software, developed specifically for education and research organisations. Following a review of all of the data gathered in Phase 1, and in particular the comments from community participants, and then meetings with and suggestions from the three stakeholder groups (education bodies, political representatives and wider organisations) in January and February 2023, the survey was amended, and piloted. The wording of some of the questions and the structure of the survey were further developed following the learning from that pilot and the final version of the survey was made available for five weeks from Monday 27th March to Friday 28th April 2023. Publicity for the survey, including a QR barcode for ease of access, was distributed to a range of organisations who work with communities along the border. The information was also circulated to all local politicians on both sides of the border, working as Councillors in border areas, and to regional/national politicians (MLAs and MPs in Northern Ireland

and TDs in the Republic of Ireland). It was also shared by email with all schools within 5 miles/8 kilometres from the border, and all pre-schools that could be identified and contacted, with the request that they distribute it to parents.

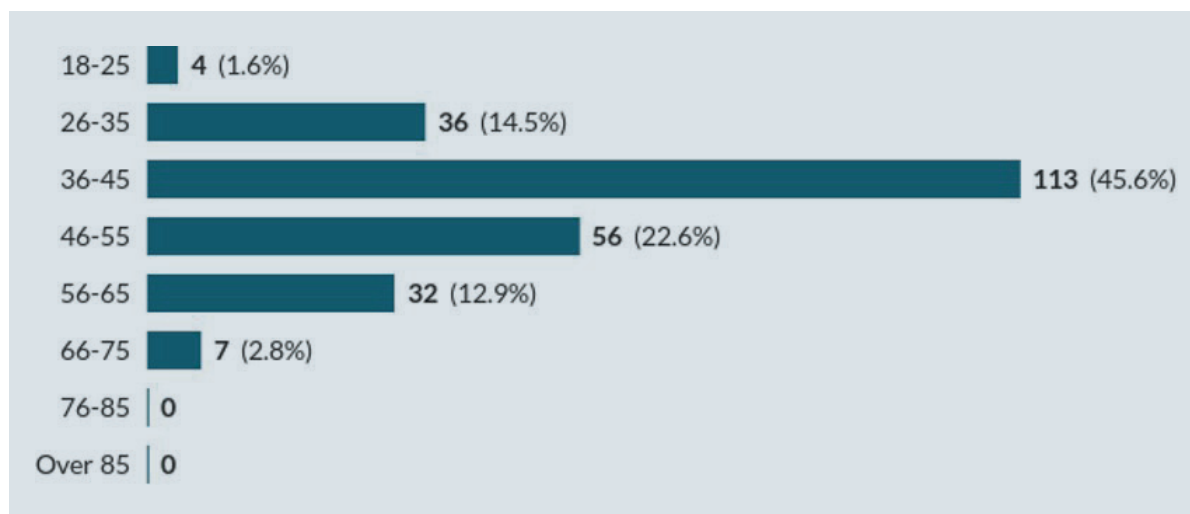
1.1 Biographic background

In all there were 249 completed responses to the survey. Of those who participated, most (79.3%) were female, around a fifth (19.9%) male and a small proportion who preferred not to say (0.8%).

1.2 Age

In terms of age distribution (Graph 1), the modal age category was 36-45, and no-one over 75 years of age completed the survey. As ethical approval for research with young people was not a component of this work, there were no contributors under 18 years of age.

Figure 1: Age of respondents



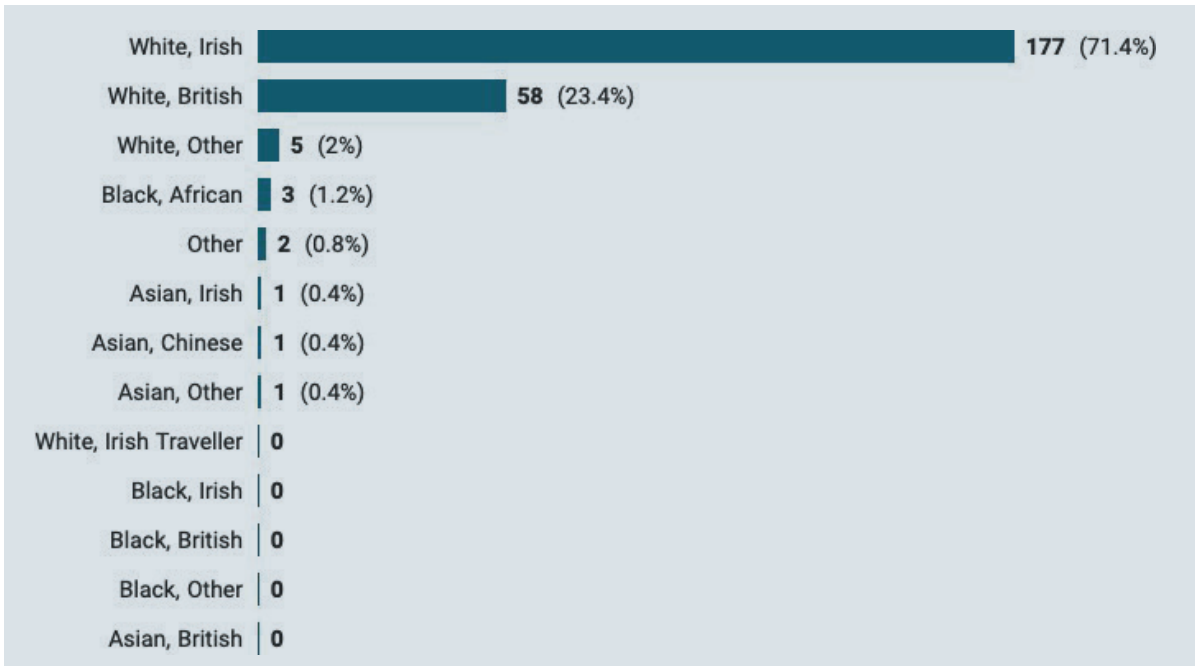
1.3 Ethnicity

The largest group of respondents identified as White Irish (71%) followed by White British (23%). As we shall see, there was a higher proportion of respondents resident in Northern Ireland, and many of them identified as White Irish, along with a high proportion of those resident in border counties in Ireland. There was also a range of other responses but overall, outside the two main groupings, these were small numbers. Additional ethnicity information was provided by six respondents, including ‘white Northern Irish’, ‘white European’, Polish, ‘Asian Punjabi’ and French.

1.4 Religious background

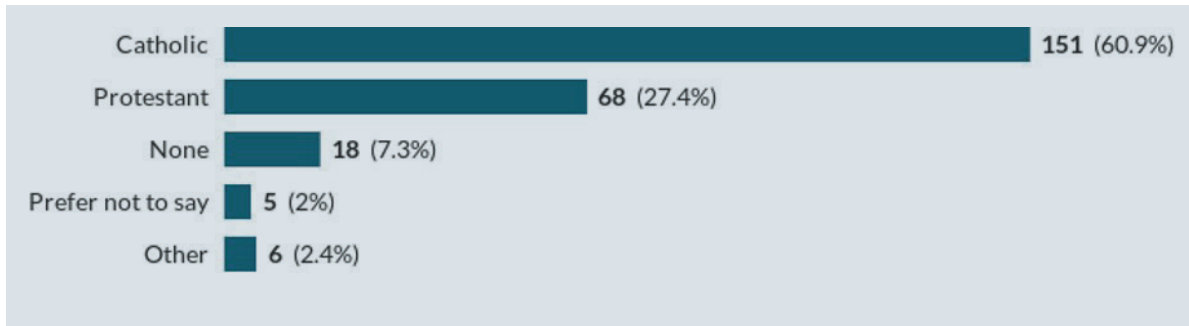
The main religious background of the respondents was Catholic which, at 61%, was more than twice that of the second grouping, Protestant (27%). This may reflect the overall population in border areas with more Catholics than Protestants in the 2021 census in all the Local Government Districts with a border with Ireland, except Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon. In that area, the Catholic population was just less than the overall Protestant population.¹ In the Republic of Ireland counties, there were more Catholic respondents despite their overall proportion falling compared to previous censuses.²

Figure 2: Ethnicity of respondents



¹ Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2023) Census 2021 main statistical religion tables <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/census-2021-main-statistics-religion-tables>

² CSO (2023) Census of Population 2016... Religion <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp8iter/p8iter/p8rrc/>

Figure 3: Religion of respondents

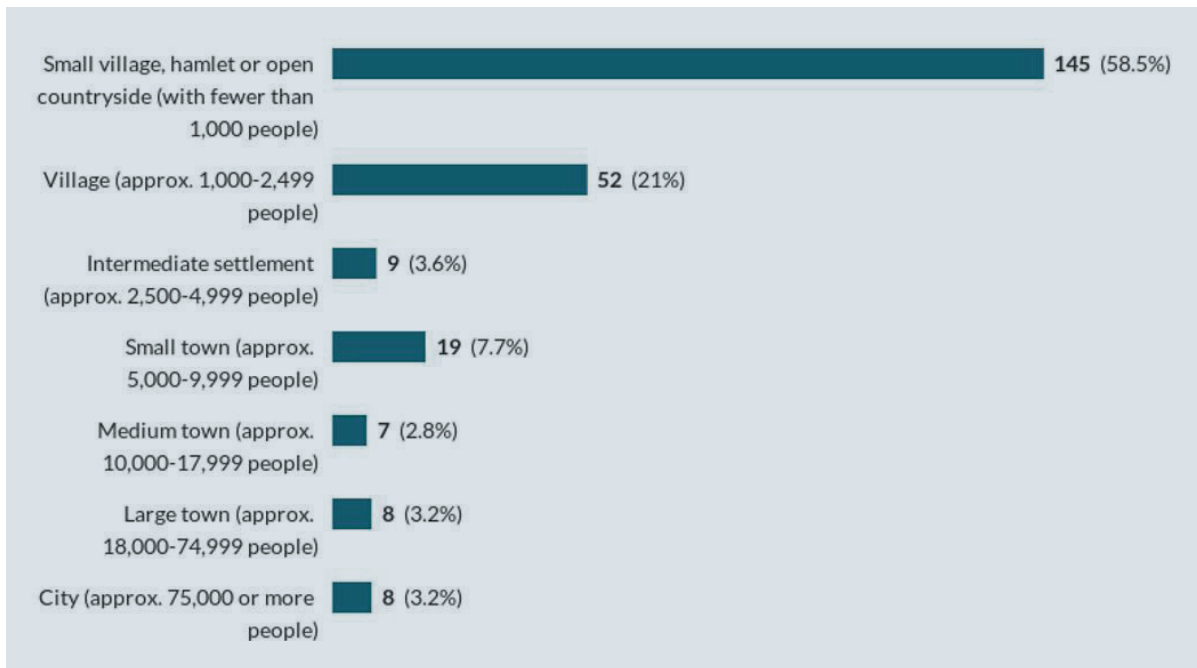
A smaller, but still significant proportion of respondents answered 'none' to this question (7%). As well as a small proportion who chose not to say, there were a small number of other religions among the responses including Orthodox, Plymouth Brethren and Muslim.

2. Settlement type

In terms of where the respondents lived, over half (59%) reported that they reside in 'small village, hamlet or open countryside with fewer than 1000 people', while the next largest grouping (21%) lived in larger villages

(of over 1000 but less than 2500 people). Smaller proportions lived in larger settlements, with, for example, 8% living in small towns and 3% in cities.

Figure 4: Settlement type



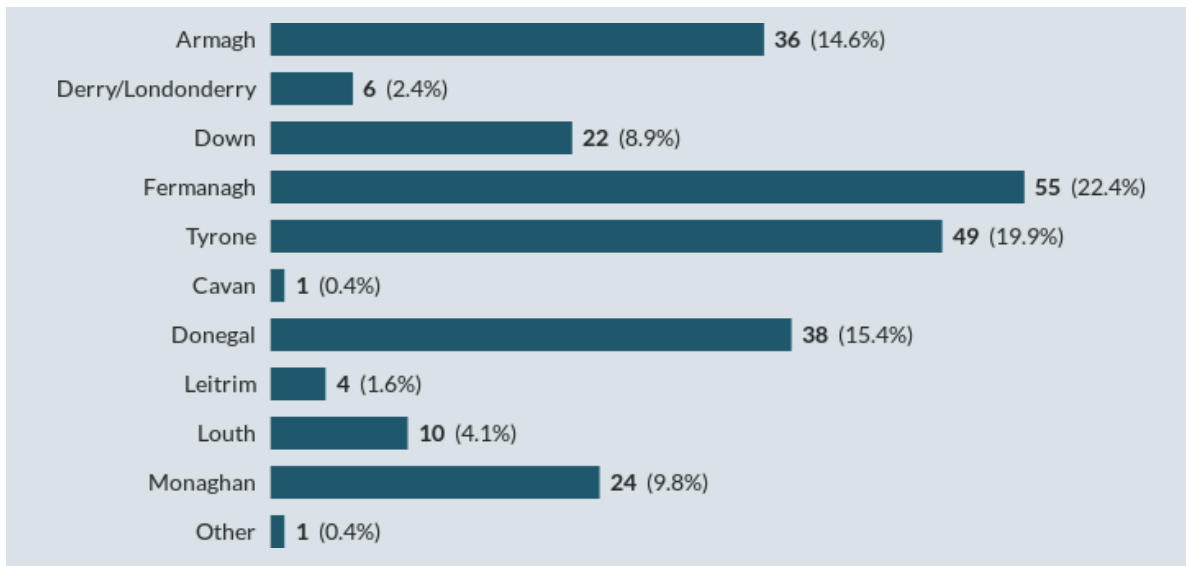
3. Geography of respondents

3.1 Distribution

Most (68%) of the respondents lived in Northern Ireland, and the most common county in which residents responded to the survey was Fermanagh, but there were responses from

all the Northern Ireland counties with a land border with Ireland. Donegal was the county with the highest number of respondents in Ireland but, again, all counties which share a land border with Northern Ireland contained residents who were reflected in the results.

Figure 5: County of residence of respondents

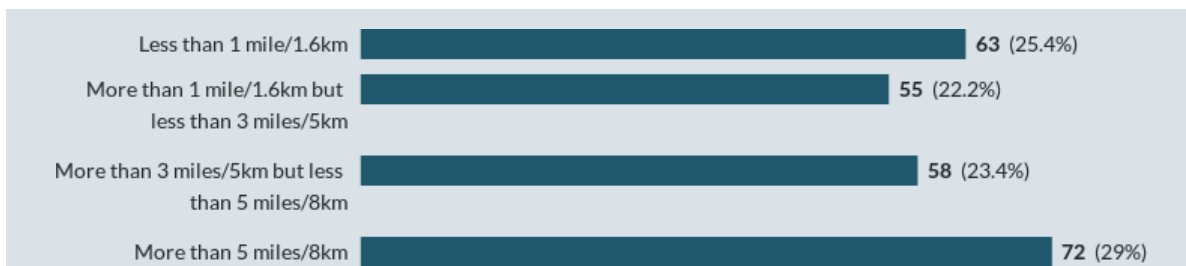


3.2 Proximity to the border

Most respondents lived close to the border, with 58% living less than 3 miles/5 kilometres from it. In total 71% lived less than 5 miles/8 kilometres from the border, indicating that

the survey response was largely from people for whom the border was something with the potential to feature in their everyday lives. The other 29% lived five miles or more from the border but, as other answers indicated, for these respondents too, the border had an important influence on their lives.

Figure 6: Proximity to the border of residence



4. Household information

4.1 Number of people per household

The most common household size of respondents was five and over, (36%) and there was a very small proportion of households of 1 person (4%).

4.2 Number of children and young people per household

Just over a quarter of households of the survey participants had 'no children and young people', while the remainder had at least one. The most common proportion of children and young people in households was three (29%), while there was a very small proportion (2%) of households with five or more children and young people.

Figure 7: Number of people per household

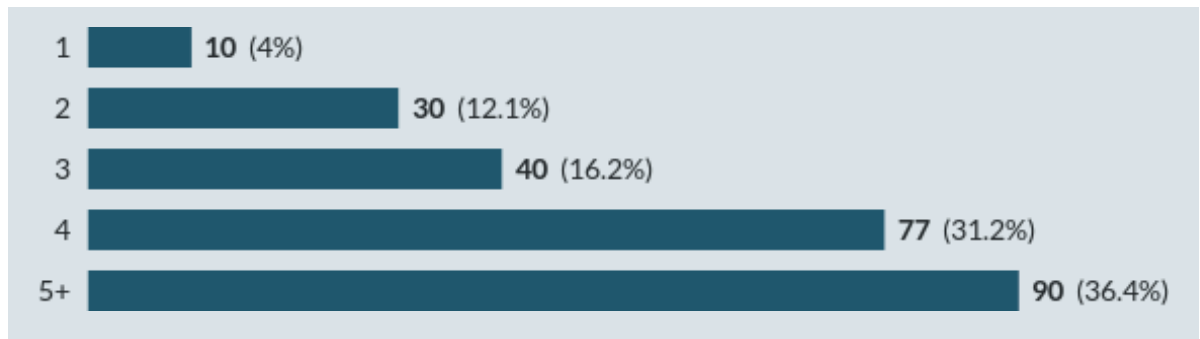
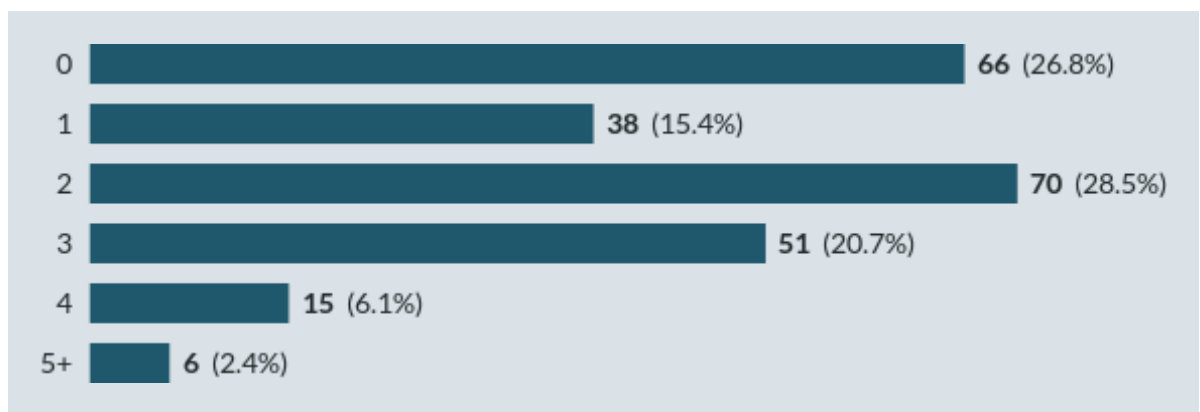


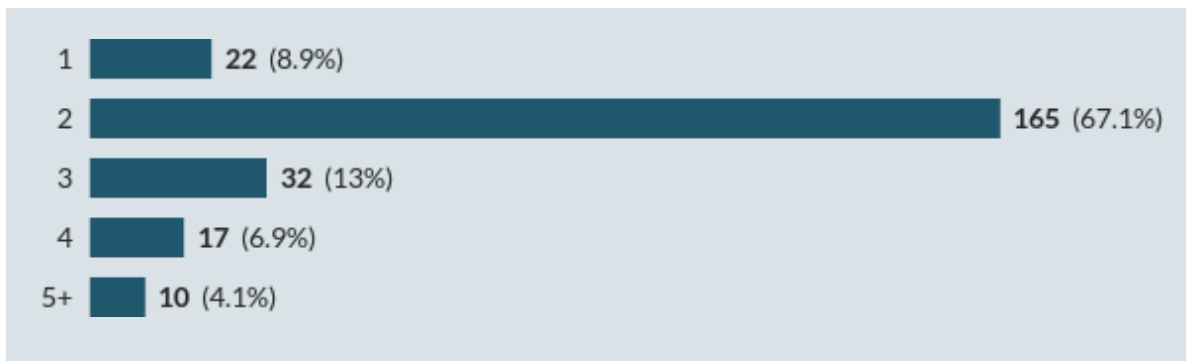
Figure 8: Number of children and young people (<18) in the household



4.3 Number of people aged 18 and over in each household

The number of people aged 18 and over in each household was most commonly two (67%), but there were some households with one (9%), and a proportion (24%) with more than two individuals aged 18 and over in the household.

Figure 9: Number of people aged 18 and over in the household

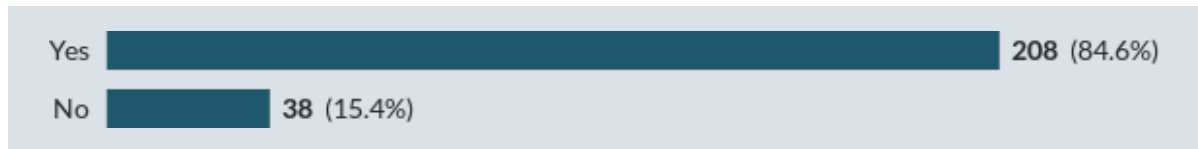


5. Employment and education

5.1 Type of employment

Most of the respondents were in full-time or part-time employment.

Figure 10: Employment status



5.2 Location of employment

The location of the places of employment is shown in Figure 11 and is reflective of the dominance of Fermanagh-located

respondents, Fermanagh is also the main place of work. The Other category is quite large (11%) and included seven instances of Dublin, five instances of Co. Antrim, and one working in Belfast and another in Sligo. One respondent was working remotely for a London-based company.

Figure 11: Location of place of employment

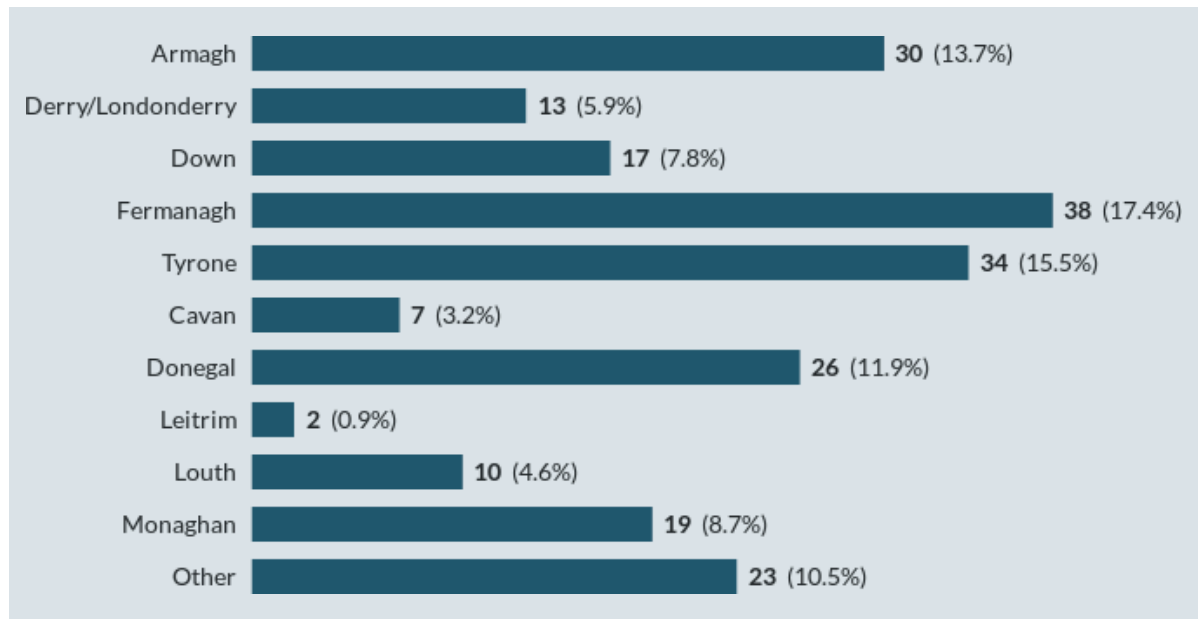
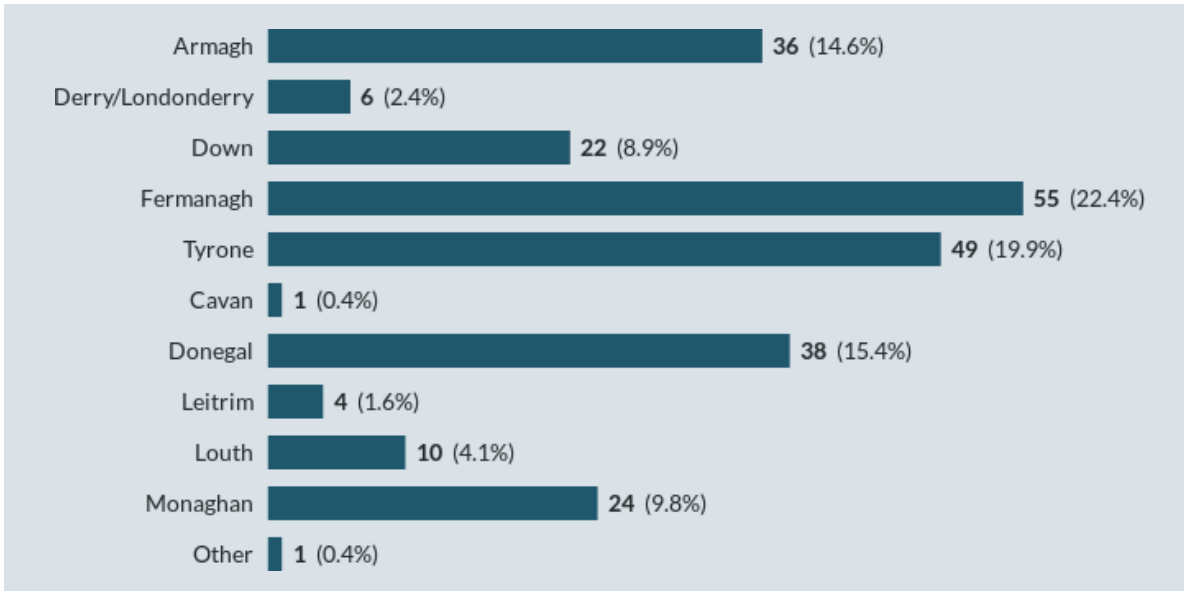


Figure 12: Location of residence



Indeed, as a comparison of Figures 11 and 12 indicate, there is a relatively close comparison between place of residence and the location of the place of employment. A couple of anomalies are Derry/Londonderry where there are more people employed than live in the county. This probably reflects people, especially from Donegal, working in the city of Derry, an urban centre with strong links with its hinterland over the border. The larger numbers living in Donegal compared to the proportion working there would seem to confirm this. Cavan too would seem unusual. While it comprises 3% of employment, it only accounts for 0.4% of respondents. There

could be employment opportunities in places like Belturbet and Ballyconnell, in County Cavan, which would be much closer than the main town in Fermanagh, Enniskillen, for respondents just across the border in Northern Ireland.

With such small numbers involved, much of the interpretation is speculative, but nonetheless this would seem to indicate a degree of movement across the border to access employment. While this operates in both directions, the main urban areas close to the border happen to be in Northern Ireland, so this may reflect a tendency for the movement to be mainly South to North.

5.3 Education

A small proportion of respondents were in full-time or part-time education (Figure 13)

Figure 13: Are you in education (full-time or part-time)?



communities, although they too may merely be reflective of comparatively isolated rural border communities. Despite these negative terms creeping into the most commonly used words, a very large majority of the words selected by respondents are positive. Those used most frequently are 'happy', 'peace', 'quiet', 'content' and 'community', suggesting that more respondents value and appreciate the areas in which they live.

6.2 Important factors located in local areas

The respondents were asked to consider which of the following amenities were most and least important to them; availability of local shops, post office, and other services and facilities, broadband access, childcare, education and schools, health care, public transport, road links and strong community relationships.

6.2.1 Most important amenities

Health care was considered the most important amenity with 32% responses, with education and schools a close second (27%), followed by local shops and other services (16%). Road links (3%), public transport (3%)

and childcare (5%) were rated as the least important amenities in this list but, nonetheless, 27 respondents chose to place one of those as their most important amenity in their area for them.

While broadband was ranked only fourth in Figure 15, it was rated 'most important' by 78% of all respondents in subsequent questions, placing it just before 'healthcare' which was selected as 'most important' by 76% of respondents, and 'Education and schools' at 72%. These were rated much more important than 'local shops, post office and other services and facilities', 'childcare' or 'public transport' which were selected as 'most important' by just 48%, 41% and 41% respectively. In addition, just one respondent (0.4%) suggested that broadband access was 'not at all important', much lower than for any other local service.

6.2.2 Least important amenities

The fact that no-one selected health as their least important amenity highlights the result in Figure 16 and the importance of healthcare to these border communities. Whether this would be common in all communities or whether

Figure 15: Most important amenities

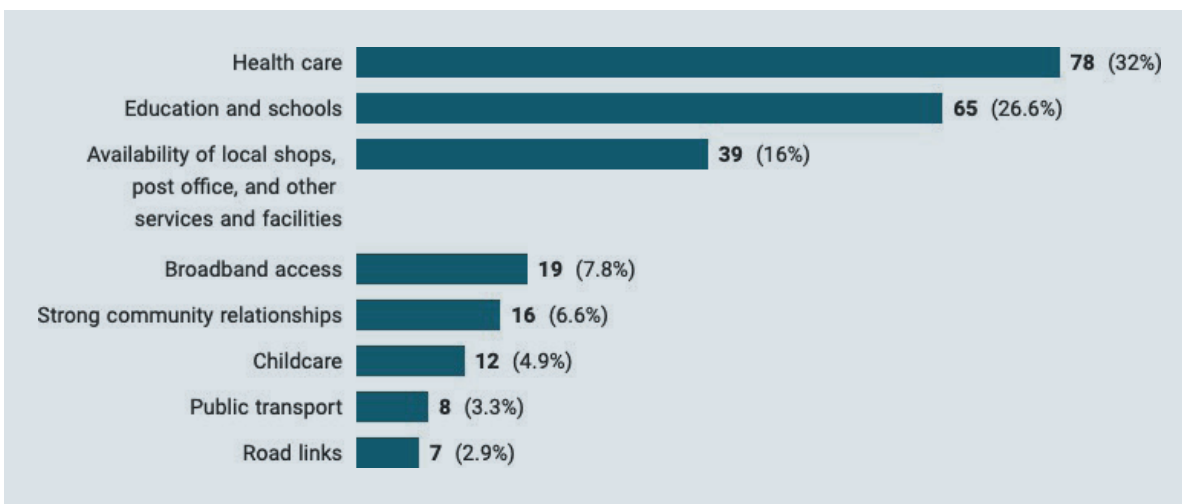
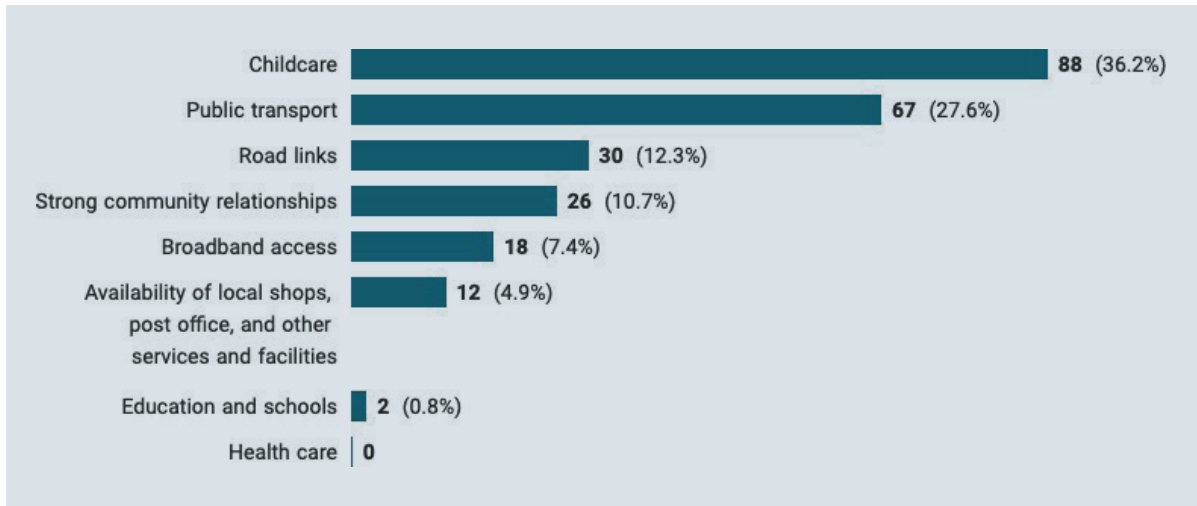


Figure 16: Least important amenities



it is a feature of these relatively isolated communities would require further research, but it is clear that health features as a vital amenity for these respondents. As with the results on the previous question, 'education and schools' lag just behind health, with just two respondents rating it as the least important amenity for them. Most respondents felt that childcare was the least important amenity. While, as we have seen (Figure 8), most household units include children and young people under 18 years of age (73%), the close-knit nature of these communities may reduce the need for external childcare. It may be that kinship links and other social arrangements may make formal childcare less necessary, and these strong community relationships were also reflected in Figure 15.

7. Living in a border community

With these communities living so close to the border, and with the findings from Phase 1 of the study, it was considered important to explore the impact of the border on respondents' lives, such as the degree to which communities cross the border, how much friction the border places on movement, and the challenges and opportunities of living in a border location more generally.

7.1 Frequency of cross-border travel

As we have already seen (Figure 12), there is some evidence of the border being crossed for employment. From this survey, nearly all respondents (84%) reported travelling across the border at least once a week, and a significant proportion (26%) crossed more than 10 times each week. A small but not insignificant proportion (16%) reported never or very rarely crossing the border; this despite the majority (71%) of the respondents overall living within 5 miles/8 kilometres from the border.

7.2 Reason for cross-border travel

When asked to select their main reason for cross-border travel, the main purpose identified by respondents was for shopping (73%) followed by social activities (60%). Many respondents clearly had friends and family on the other side of the border and crossed to visit those. Work is of lesser importance as a reason for crossing the border, but still significant and selected by 33% of respondents. Crossing the border for medical/health purposes is lower again, but still 14% of respondents cross the border for that reason.

Similarly, only 8% of respondents cross the border to take children to school. While this cannot be assumed to be cross-border attendance in all cases, as some locations may require a border crossing just to access a school in the same jurisdiction, it is likely that much of this involves learners crossing into another jurisdiction. This would seem to corroborate some of the narrative in Phase 1 of

Figure 17: Frequency of cross-border travel

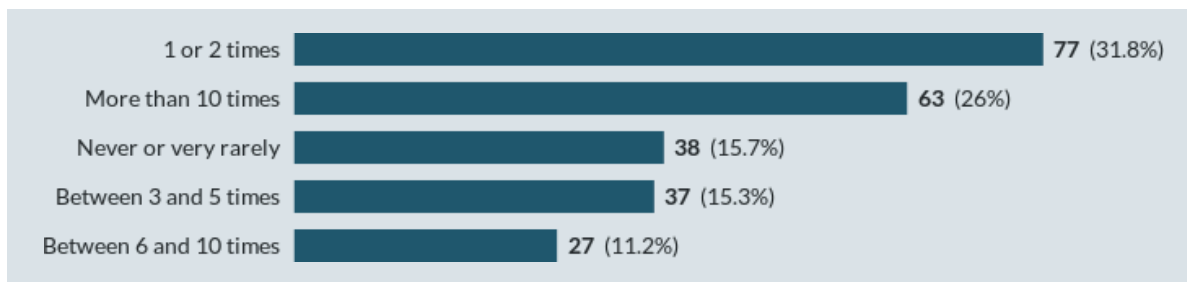
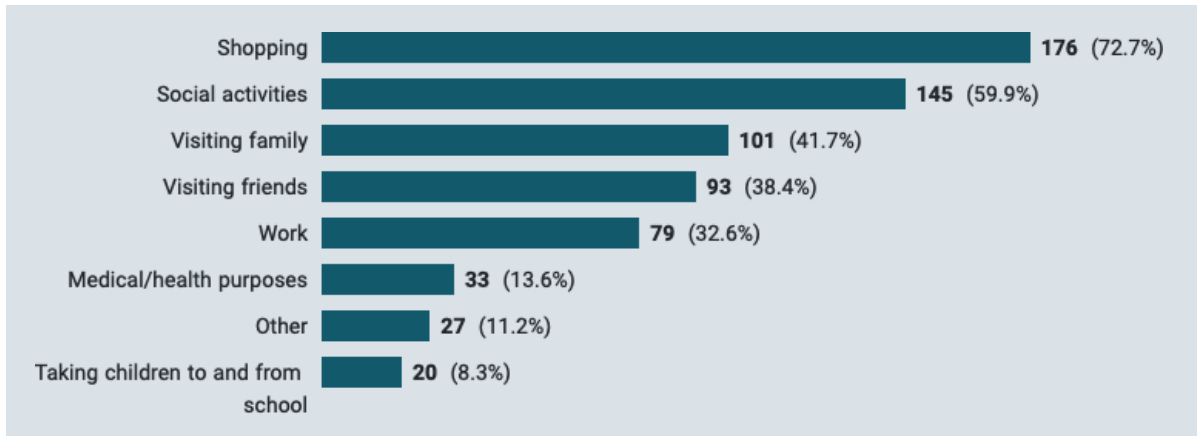


Figure 18: Reason for cross-border travel



the research, and also some of the academic literature and official reports dealing with cross-border movement of learners³.

The 'Other' category included swimming lessons, getting fuel, accessing Higher Education, attending religious ceremonies and access to childcare.

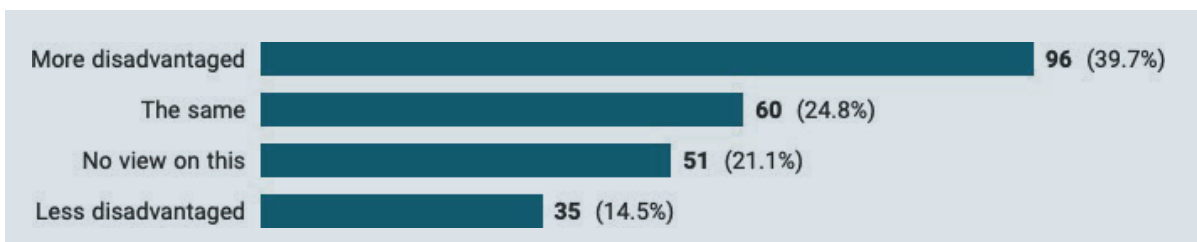
7.3 Advantages and disadvantages of living in a border region

When asked whether living close to the border made them more or less disadvantaged compared to people living elsewhere on this island, 40% felt that they were more

disadvantaged while 15% felt that they were less disadvantaged because of their border location. A quarter of all respondents felt neither more nor less disadvantaged by a border location.

Some respondents added additional information on feeling disadvantaged. Perhaps most common was the feeling that their communities were marginalised. One commented "there has been a lack of funding for a long time" and another stated that "Border people's views are never addressed". Another thought that the lack of alignment across the border was a disadvantage, as there was "no joined up thinking/cooperation across the border, dealing with two different systems for education, health, employment,

Figure 19: Does living close to the border make you more or less disadvantaged compared to other places?



³ Ó Cirraighín, S. (2013) Four times as many ROI students avail of cross border education. *The Detail*. <https://k8s.thedetail.tv/articles/four-times-as-many-roi-students-avail-of-cross-border-education>

tax and transport". The feeling of relative isolation and the lack of policies to address the challenges of border communities was summed up by one respondent, from Fermanagh, who said

"we are forgotten, we pay high rates, but our roads are horrendous, no street lighting, no community centre, no paths, school buses won't drop off at house, no money put into this area, no support".

Another respondent, from Monaghan, complained

"we are completely underserved. Our roads are a disgrace, we have no public transport and no health services".

One from Donegal said

"Public transport is totally inadequate and there is very much a feeling of being forgotten about by central government".

In contrast, there were some responses which highlighted positive attributes about living in a border region, such as "If you live on the border you have options about which side to do things, like shop, work, educate your children" and "... for us it is very handy to have the best of both worlds". This advantage was seen by some as more than just a personal benefit as "Businesses are able to make the most of the fact that they can access the EU and the UK"

7.4 Perceptions of Brexit and its impact

Respondents were provided with an open question relating to their perception of Brexit and its impact on the border. Of the 213 responses to this question, 83 (39%) felt that Brexit had had an impact on their area. One commented, "Brexit had real potential day-to-day, consequences for the most simple of things

for me" while another respondent said "I closed my business that I had for 20 years, due to Italian suppliers reluctant to supply products". A number of responses were concerned that re-bordering the island might produce issues "Brexit made the border an issue again..., where, before we were learning to live with an almost inconsequential border" and, similarly, "a border that had become somewhat invisible and unimportant has returned to our minds and caused problems again". There were also a very small number of respondents who felt that Brexit had had an impact but welcome it: "[this] gives the UK proper position on sovereignty".

On the other hand, most respondents (56%) felt that Brexit had little or no impact on them. "No impact whatsoever" was the gist of many responses, and others commented "we originally lived in Tyrone and moved across the border. We see no real impact with Brexit" and "no, not really at this time, I'll wait to see what the protocol brings". Some clearly felt that Brexit did not change their views on the border with a number of respondents commenting along the lines of "not at all, my activities across the border are important to me. Brexit does not impact that at all" and "we continue the same, we won't let Brexit stop or interfere". Another respondent commented "no, because I see Ireland as one island, hence no visible border. And Brexit hasn't affected my day-to-day living, yet".

The remaining 5% were ambivalent, with most of this group unsure of what lay ahead with Brexit. One said "[It] hasn't directly impacted yet, if checks were in place on the border, then this would have a negative impact on our lives" while another said "at the minute no impact as I can still cross the border without any hassle". Some even viewed Brexit as something of a distraction: "I think it's all been hyped up to look like a massive problem. In reality, nothing has changed".

8. Education

As much of the focus of this research was on educational provision in border communities, a series of questions related to the perceptions of that.

8.1 Educational demographic information

Most respondents had no pre-school aged children at the time of completing the survey (Figure 15), but 22% had – most commonly, one child of that age.

There were more who had primary school aged children (Figure 16). In all, 154 respondents had children at that age, 64%

of all the respondents in the survey. In terms of post-primary children, 37% of respondents had children and young people at that age. This reflects a wide range of respondents from those currently without children of school age to those with very young children and those in older age groups.

The largest proportion of those responding had children attending a controlled primary school in NI. While 143 respondents send their children to a primary school on the same side of the border that they reside, just 12 respondents (7% of primary school aged children) had children who crossed the border to attend school.

Figure 15: How many children do you have of pre-school age?

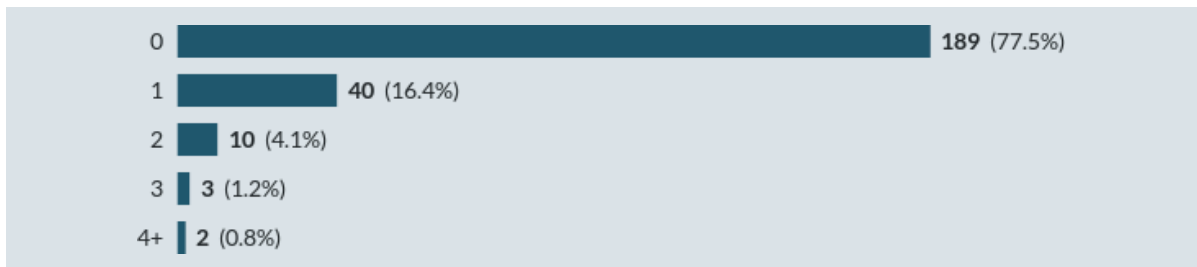


Figure 16: How many children do you have of primary school age?

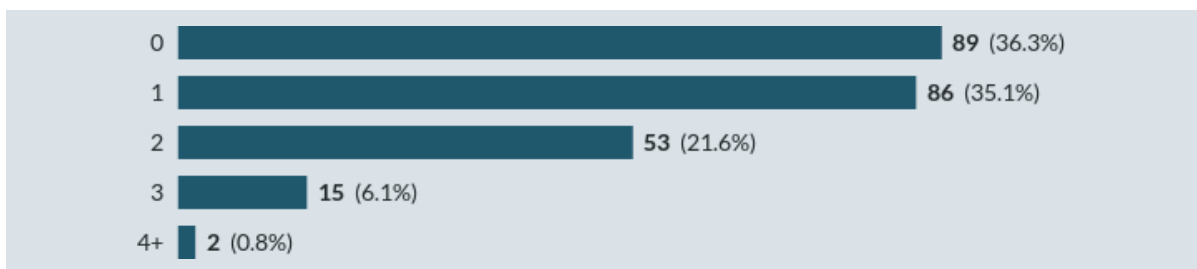


Figure 17: How many children do you have of post primary/secondary school age?

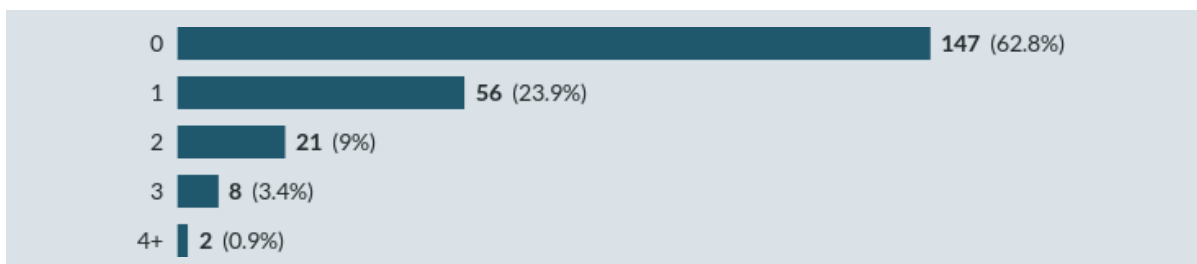
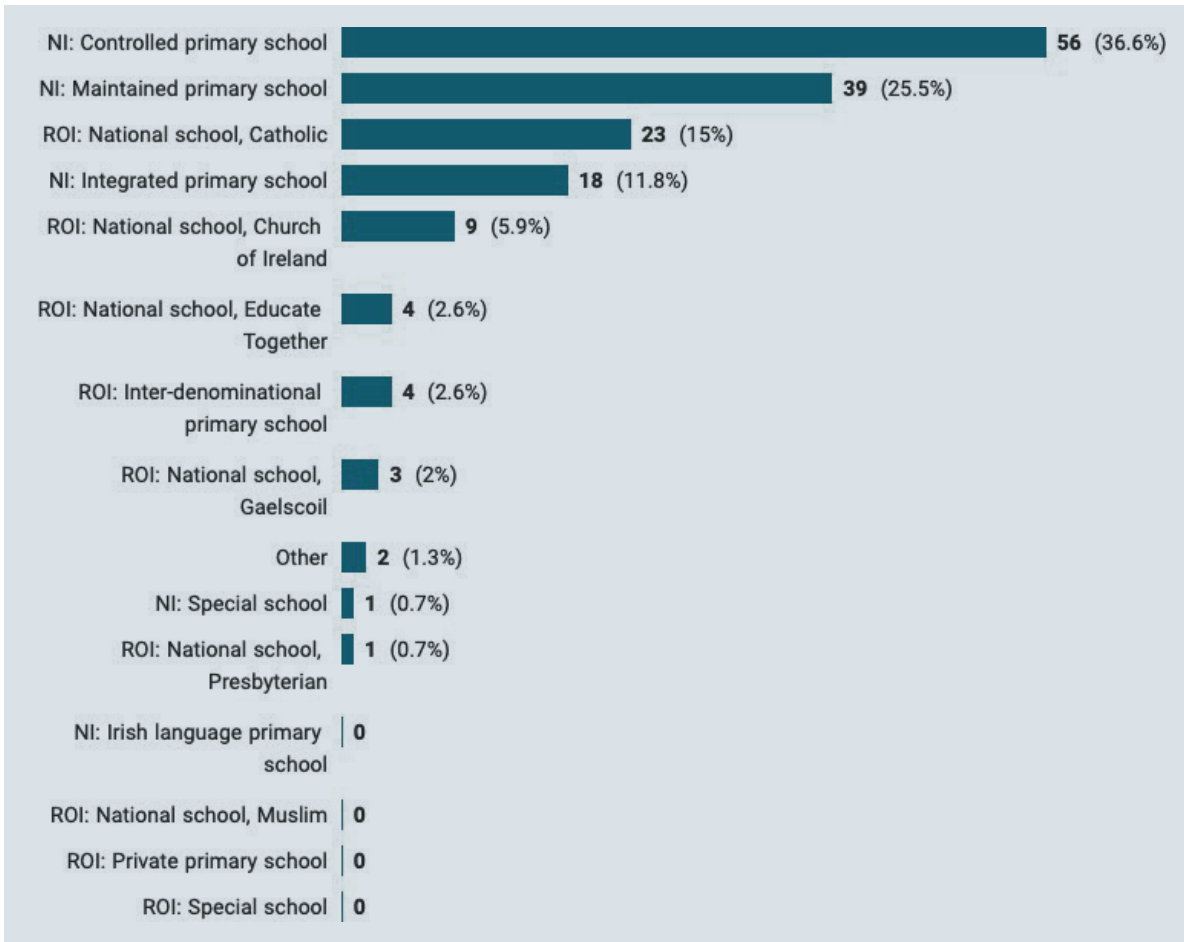


Figure 18: Schools attended

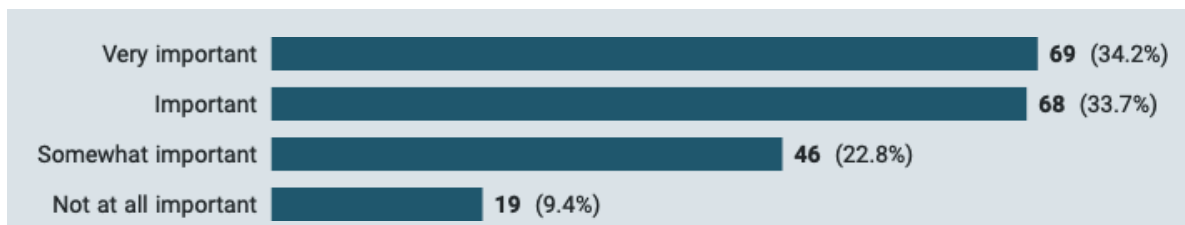


8.2 Reasons for school choice

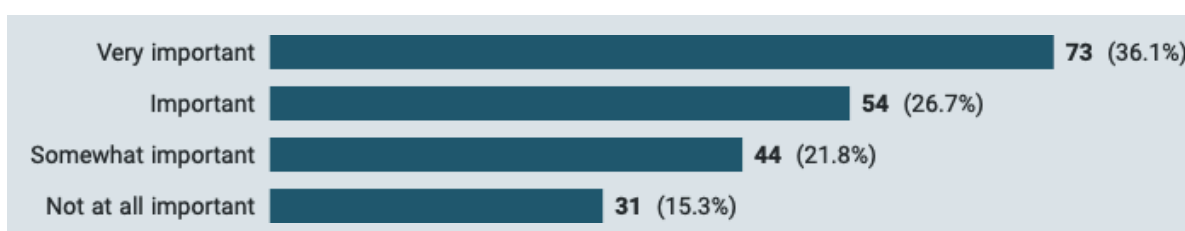
When asked how important certain factors are for choosing schools (Figure 19), 68% considered class size to be important or very important, and only 9% considered that ‘Not at all important’. A similar proportion consider convenience for childcare and wrap-around care when choosing schools, although a higher proportion (15%) consider that ‘Not at all important’. Distance from home is clearly a factor for many parents when it comes to choosing schools, with 76% rating that as important or very important. On the other hand, selecting a school which has been

attended by other members of the family is not considered important by 37% of respondents although, conversely, 63% did think that was important. Only 44% of respondents rate religious/community affiliation or ethos as important or very important in choosing a school, and 31% consider it ‘Not at all important’, which is surprising given Northern Ireland’s largely segregated school system. In contrast, school facilities and school reputation are considered important or very important by 86% and 88% respectively.

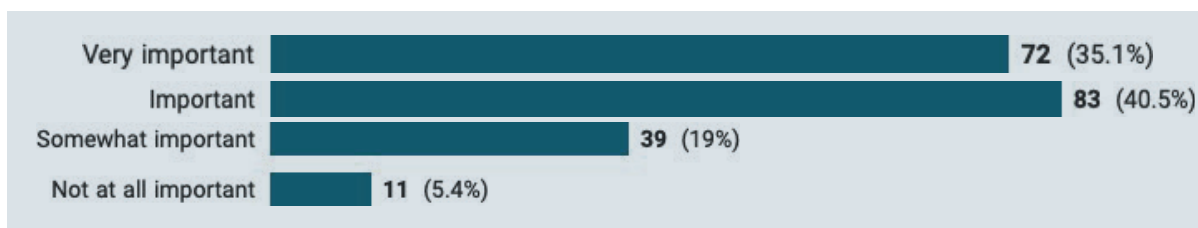
Class size



Convenience for childcare/wrap around care



Distance from home



Feeder school for post-primary school



Maintaining friendship groups from pre-school

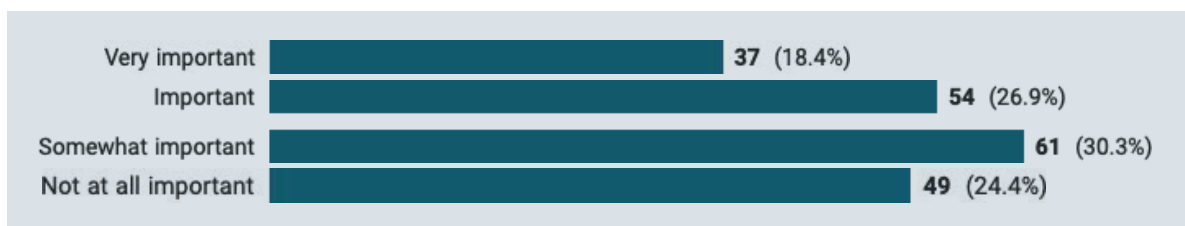
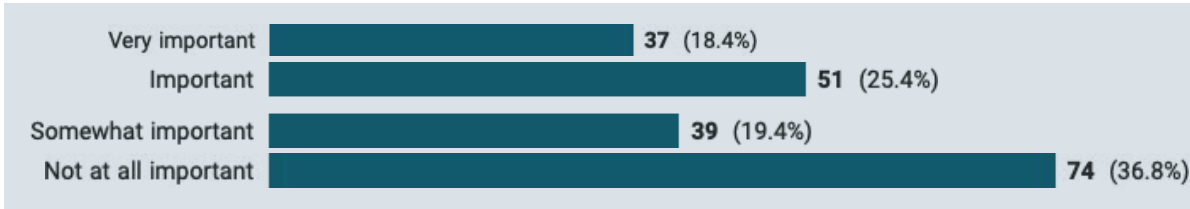
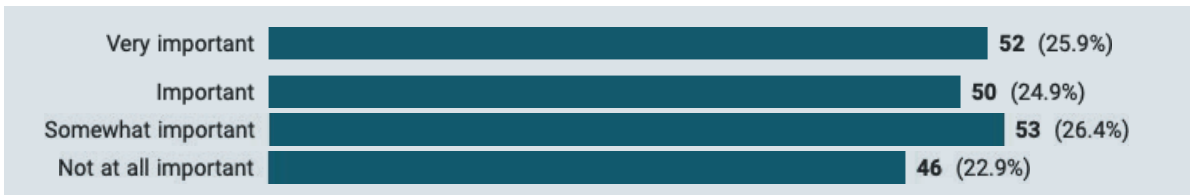


Figure 19: Reasons for school choice

Other members of family attended



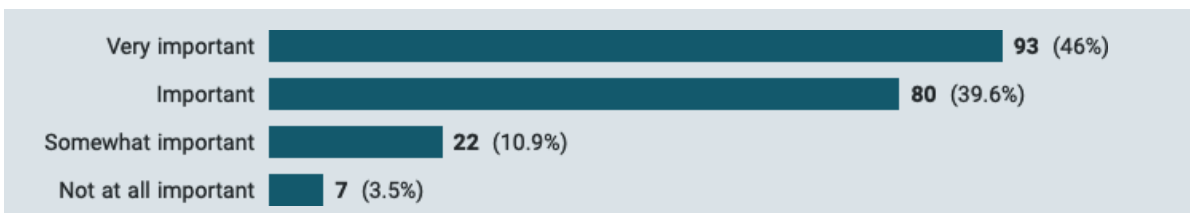
Special Educational Needs provision



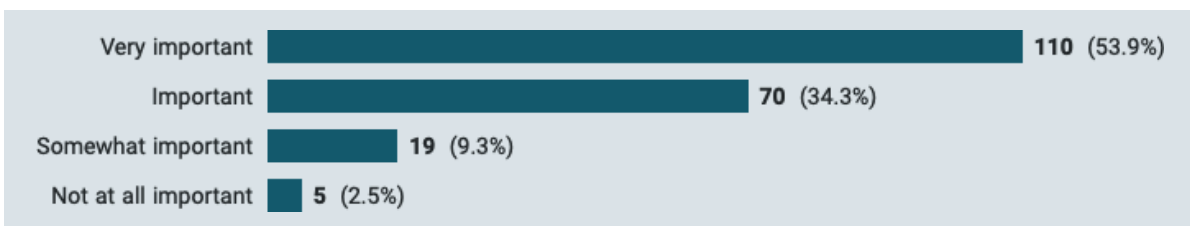
Religious/ community affiliation or school ethos



School facilities



School reputation



8.3 School sustainability

Respondents were asked about the current primary education provision in their border area in terms of school enrolments and local population trends. In most cases, respondents seemed confident about the sustainability of their schools. A cross-tabulation calculation in JISC suggested that there were schools on both sides of the border which were considered unsustainable by respondents, with 26 primary schools in all identified as such. However, most (16) of those primary schools rated unsustainable were located in Northern Ireland and just seven in Ireland. This may reflect policy differences in the two jurisdictions. There is no policy on minimum size of schools in Ireland, while in the North, there is an intention that all schools should meet a sustainable enrolment of 105, in rural areas. Thus, a small school of perhaps 20 pupils might not be viewed as unsustainable by parents in the Republic, while in Northern Ireland schools much larger might be seen as being under threat. On the other hand, 62% of respondents rated their schools

as sustainable or very sustainable at present (Figure 20). As only 9.6% of respondents view their schools as ‘not at all sustainable’, the future sustainability of primary schools in these border communities might be relatively positively viewed. While Figure 21, which looks at sustainability over the next seven years (Figure 21), suggests that sustainability generally seems to hold up quite well at 55%, it is notable that the proportion believing that provision will not be sustainable by then almost doubles to 19%. Should this estimation be correct, this would suggest that one in five of all of these border schools may be under threat by 2030.

The comments accompanying these questions on sustainability illustrate the differences in communities. Some are optimistic that rural schools close to urban centres can attract parents because of the unique offering that a rural school might provide: “Children travelling out of town to country school. New houses, new families”. Others identify cross-border movement of children as important in keeping schools sustainable:

Figure 20: Present sustainability of primary school provision in your area

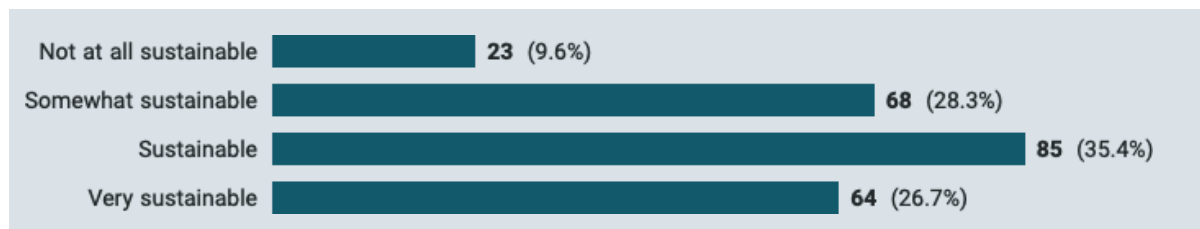


Figure 21: Sustainability of primary school provision in 2030



Small rural schools have manageable numbers and provide quality education so are sustainable especially with pupils using it from both sides of the border and in future with support in promoting rural border communities in access to public transport this will increase numbers remaining in area and keep numbers sustainable.

Others may feel that their remoteness from other competitor schools might be an advantage, particularly in Northern Ireland, where most schools cater for one section of the population and the comment “Only local controlled school for 6 miles” may reflect this. Still others have healthy and growing numbers, causing a problem for some schools that many other Principals and communities would envy:

my primary school is bursting at the seams! They have over 160 pupils and keep taking in more yet physically the building does NOT have room.”

Other respondents have a different narrative. One Northern Ireland respondent commented

The local Protestant primary school has small numbers so would be of possible risk in the future if numbers are not maintained. Problems with this are obviously small children having to travel further for their local school and to a bigger school that doesn't have the same time or attention per child.

and another lamented that processes of school rationalisation have already had an impact:

Schools in the area have amalgamated already. Smaller schools have already closed.

A number of respondents commented on the causes of the pressures that they perceived on the primary schools in their area. For some it is depopulation, especially a loss of young people and their families from the area. “Because of no jobs in the area the young couples are heading to the larger urban areas where there is jobs and better Infrastructure”, one said. There is also the uncertainty of continued provision in some rural primaries, which might lead to parents making alternative choices:

Due to the current situation with government and funding our 2 local schools are under threat due to numbers. Due to this constant threat working parents especially want the safety knowing their child will have the steady education and childcare in place without risk of them having to transfer at any stage to another school.

A large proportion of the comments, especially in Northern Ireland, identified duplication as an issue threatening the sustainability of schools in their area:

Small rural town with two primary schools separated by religious lines. Right across from each other. Even with population decline both schools could amalgamate and provide education to the area.

Another said “Too many small schools. Each village has x2 schools for maintained/controlled”. However, a move towards school amalgamations would not be welcomed by all, even if there is a threat to provision. One respondent explained:

The numbers of children in the controlled school are very low. Next available controlled school is 10 miles away. I don't feel comfortable sending my children to the Catholic school where they would be in the minority.

Another respondent from Northern Ireland, highlighted potential alternative arrangements

2 catholic schools were closed and amalgamated 10 years ago and there's c. 95 pupils and there's 1 Protestant school c. 40 pupils. I don't know how they weren't all amalgamated together.

For those communities in which sustainability is considered uncertain, there is a real concern as to the impact of school closures. One commented

The primary school my children attend has been having fewer intake of students in the 8 years I've been taking my children there. Class sizes are reducing and I worry what will happen long term.

while another, worried about the impact on the community itself, said

Ok for now, but demographics indicate National School will be closed in years to come and the village viability will be imperilled

8.4 Main challenges facing primary school provision in border areas

This open question garnered, in all, 181 responses. A range of challenges for primary schools in these border communities were raised by respondents. The main factors recurring in many of the comments related to transport and to challenges of funding. Funding issues for schools, including primary schools, are widespread across Northern Ireland and Ireland and these generally smaller schools along the border may be even more impacted by this. Transport is a specific issue for them in their border locations and 16 respondents specifically highlight transport

as an issue for their communities. One Tyrone resident said

If handled properly, schools can thrive in small communities where proper school bus services are provided.

Some of the challenges of transport relate to public transport but home-school funded travel, available in Northern Ireland, can also be an issue. One noted, as their challenge: "school transport - South doesn't allocate school buses in same capacity as North."

Others highlighted the small and often declining population as an issue with "low population density" simply provided as a challenge by one respondent. Others combine this with further challenges, with one identifying their main perceived challenges as "too small a population, too much segregation, lack of funding".

Staffing also appears to be an issue for some communities with one respondent, for their challenges, identifying "transport and staff availability". Another highlighted staffing issues:

There are not enough teachers. I'm a teacher in a local school and we currently have 3 full time positions that cannot be filled by a fully qualified professional.

Staff shortages may relate to wider issues of attracting and retaining young people, particularly in rural communities. It may also be related to an ageing population in some rural areas, perhaps exacerbated by rising housing costs deterring young people from remaining in the area, or from moving there. One respondent identified a fall in the number of children in her area, and suggested reasons:

More retired people are settling in the area - many English retirees are able to downsize and settle in the area, because housing in [county in NI] is relatively cheaper. Retirees settle here because they still want to access NHS services. This makes it more difficult for families to buy affordable housing. Travel distance to urban centres of employment also makes it a less attractive proposition for young working people with families. Also, smaller family sizes from previous generations.

The impact of the border was also raised in some responses, as a challenge for border schools. In some cases the numbers crossing the border has declined as “not as many children from the republic attend our local primary school”. Another respondent, from Northern Ireland, commented that:

I think one of the challenges will be children coming across the border to attend our primary schools, this has been happening for a number of years.

While the precise nature of the challenge is unclear in this case, it might be interpreted as suggesting that cross-border movement of learners is a requirement for some schools to remain sustainable. One respondent from Ireland perceived that it was

Much cheaper for parents to send children to school across the border [as there were] free books and uniform and breakfast clubs and after school clubs offered across the border.

Other challenges identified supported points made elsewhere in the survey:

In my village there are 2 schools of different religions, it should in my view be integrated as the playgroup and day care are integrated so why not the primary school?!

while another highlighted another issue associated with school size, funding and accessibility, arguing that

rural schools are closing as they can't compete with schools in towns that can cater for breakfast clubs and afterschool clubs for working parents.

8.5 Main differences between primary school provision on each side of the border

The final substantive question in the online survey asked about perceived differences in primary education in the two jurisdictions.

Many admitted to having limited knowledge of the systems on the other side of the border from them. One northern respondent said “I do not know anything about primary schools in RoI [Republic of Ireland]”, and similar comments were not uncommon on either side of the border.

Some, despite admitting limited knowledge, identified differences in teacher pay

Not familiar with North. More Northern school have better programmes like canteens/lunches. But ROI teachers well paid and better resourced.

and

I teach in primary school in republic. Don't know much about northern schools only that teachers don't get as well paid.

Differences in funding was seen as influencing the movement of staff. One said: “teachers and classroom assistants are in a better pay scale and [this is an] incentive to go across border”.

Where differences were recognised, some responses identified contrasts in the curricula with, for example, *“Irish [is not] not compulsory in NI.”* It was also perceived that *“Republic schools seem more sport focused which is good but are also more religion focused which is not good”*. A not uncommon perception was that schools in Northern Ireland were less relaxed and that *“pupils [were] pushed more in NI”*.

The last comment may be related to the 11+ transfer test which is offered to learners in Northern Ireland⁴. One respondent commented

[I] prefer Rol system, transfer test system in NI seems unnecessarily pressurised for primary children. Know a number of children and their families who have found the transfer test system to be stressful and even traumatic.

Another said

Used to think NI was better funded but not anymore. Don't like my local school forced religious education nor academic selection.

Perceived disparities in funding and resources were also identified. One Co. Donegal respondent suggested that there were *“Better facilities in Republic and local access to second level schools”* while another, from County Armagh, perceived that the *“Budget seems better in the Republic”*. In contrast, another respondent looking across the border from Co. Donegal, felt that *“school facilities are in my opinion far superior, [and the] availability of SEN in NI [is] much better”*.

One respondent, identifying herself as a teacher, argued that there was a difference in resourcing, but that differences went beyond that:

NI schools are better resourced, however as a teacher we work longer hours for less pay! We also have so much accountability now that teaching is interrupted on a daily basis with child protection issues and SEN issues.

Structural differences were also identified, with the main ones being the starting age and the age of transfer to second level education.

The starting age of children's education is the main difference... I believe that Northern Ireland children are at a disadvantage as they start earlier. I also believe that is reflected in the ability of children when they move to secondary school. The transfer test also severely impacts the children from the North.

Differences in perceived government policy were also highlighted by some respondents, particularly that related to how small schools were viewed and how the school estate in rural areas, particularly in Northern Ireland, was rationalised through school amalgamations, a policy difference noted earlier. A view from Monaghan perceived that

Government policy on maintaining very small schools south of the border is much better. The Department of Education is very reluctant to close a small school, citing its importance to the local community (especially in the case of minority religion schools)

4 Roulston, S., Brown, M., Taggart, S. and Eivers, E. (2023a) Growing apart or Coming together?: Deconstructing Education Policy and Practice on the island of Ireland. In *Proceedings of the Educational Studies Association of Ireland (ESAI)*; Roulston, S., Brown, M., Taggart, S. and Eivers, E. (2023b) *A Century of Growing Apart and Challenges of Coming Together: Education Across the Island of Ireland. Analysing and Researching Ireland, North and South*, Royal Irish Academy.

8.6 Additional comments

When asked whether there was anything they would like to add regarding the future of primary school provision in their area, a number of general comments were provided.

Some comments regarding school support related to disadvantage, which is addressed differently in Northern Ireland to Ireland. One respondent argued for a

review of [the] needs of DEIS schools in [the] border area, and all schools in areas of deprivation be identified as DEIS schools [with] special provision made for their needs. Policies should reflect variation of needs rather than be one size (usually large urban area based) fits all.

Some comments were related to school ethos and curriculum, of which these would be representative: “More options for school without a religious ethos would be great” and “So many resources wasted on religious education, time can be better spent on rest of curriculum. More music, more art in schools”.

Others agreed with the general theme but linked it to denominational separation of schools:

Kick religious influence out. Religion class to be simply studies of world religions at surface level. No indoctrination. No education separation of children based on religion

Others expressed the need for school choice to be wider than the traditional denominationally divided schools, with one respondent, possibly a teacher, saying: “Would like to see an Educate Together school. I would like to work in one and have that option for my future children to attend.” Others argued for “more integrated

schools. And not only integrated but religious education taken out of schools completely (apart from comparative religion as social education)” and, one respondent observed that, “we cannot afford to keep duplicating services and resources. I think rural areas need to look at a genuine integrated approach”. Another respondent wanted to increase “the awareness of gaelscoileanna in the area”.

Others used the opportunity to re-emphasise the importance of small schools for their communities, and to express fears if they were not fully supported: “Closure of small schools is [the] downfall of a local area” and “small schools need to be a bigger priority for Government as they are the life blood for communities”. One praised their school saying “it’s a lovely small school which would be a big miss if it wasn’t here”.

The opportunity was taken by some to discuss cross-border movement of learners. One linked that with increased choice:

I would like [there] to be more promotion around the availability and choices that parents have on which schools their children can attend. If a child lives 100 yards from a school that they wish to attend but the border is in between then there shouldn’t be any reason that they can’t attend. Accessibly and choice should not be limited because of the border.

Some, apparently minority, communities feared for their continued survival in some border areas, were their school to be threatened with closure.

Smaller Protestant schools need to stay open in this area

one said, a view echoed by another respondent who said:

I really hope the little controlled school will remain in place or there will be even fewer Protestant families prepared to call this their home.

Both of these respondents defined themselves as Protestant, and lived close to the border in County Fermanagh.

Others fear for the future of small rural schools altogether

...if you make parents choose between schools based on their religious ethos in communities where there are already small numbers of children it makes all of the schools in that community unsustainable and in my view will ensure that in the future small "country" schools will be closed in favour of schools in larger towns.

Small schools in Northern Ireland are predominantly in rural areas, and many are under pressure from the Education Authority and CCMS as they attempt to rationalise the school estate by amalgamating small schools deemed unsustainable. In one study, 50% of primary Principals identified declining pupil numbers as a challenge and 31% identified pressure or threat of closure⁵.

⁵ Fargas-Malet, M. and Bagley, C. (2022) Serving DIVIDED communities: Consociationalism and the experiences of principals of small rural primary schools in Northern Ireland. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, pp.1-22.

9. Conclusion

With 249 responses, the results provided here have to be treated with some caution. Nonetheless, there are striking overlaps between these responses and the findings in Phase 1 of the research which involved semi-structured interviews with Principals and Community Conversations and Listening Events with members of the community in three selected border areas. There were common themes with regard to evidence of crossing the border for multiple purposes such as to access employment, for entertainment or for education. For some individuals border crossing was frequent and, for many, there was effectively no border and no impediment to movement. However, for some, there were worries that Brexit might harden the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, although more respondents felt that it had had little impact on their day-to-day activities. Some were concerned in case Brexit could result in a hardening of the border which, in turn, would have consequences that would be unhelpful to communities on the border.

The generally positive estimations of their local place were also common in both phases of the research, and the opportunities of living in a border location were identified by respondents in both the face-to-face sessions and this online survey. On the other hand, respondents were very clear about the challenges that communities along the border face and the online survey too showed that some respondents were concerned with isolation, underinvestment and neglect of rural communities and their economies. Some of these issues extended to schools. While, in both phases of the research, it was difficult to disentangle the impact of the border over more general aspects of rural isolation, the issues relating to rural isolation appear to be perceived to be more extreme in border communities.

In terms of education, the responses again seemed to corroborate, to a large extent, the findings of Phase 1 of the research. There were some surprises, such as the attendance by other members of the family not being an important factor in parents' choice of school. Phase 1 of the research found that *"many of those who have moved across the border to live still prefer to use the school that they and their family have used for generations"*. In most instances in this study, that was a movement from Ireland to attend schools in Northern Ireland. However, whatever the direction of movement, in the online survey factors such as class size and distance are considered more important. Also surprising is the low importance placed on religious/community affiliation or ethos of a school in rating school choice factors. The behaviour of individuals and the actual choices they make, however, may not accord with their ranking of important factors when actually choosing a school and, if faced with limited choice and having to 'choose' a school in which their child is in a minority denomination, then this factor might become much more important.

Challenges for school sustainability are a common thread in all the phases of research, although the online survey indicates that this challenge varies from community to community, and some communities currently feel little threat. The online survey does contain some evidence of respondents fearing the loss of the school which serves their community believing this to be an existential threat to a continuation of their community in that area.

Phase 3:

Return Visits to Two Areas

Report Completed: August 2023

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1. Research background and methodology

Two of the areas previously visited by the research teams in late 2022 and early 2023 were visited again on 22nd May and 6th June 2023. Community Conversations had been organised for each location, one on each side of the border during the day, and an evening event close to the border and accessible to community members on each side of the border.

Use was made of neutral community spaces in leisure centres, libraries and community halls to encourage respondents to attend. As with previous events, considerable efforts were made to publicise the events including contact being made with all the primary and pre-primary schools in the areas, who were asked to share the information with their parents and the wider community. Additionally, details of the events and a request to disseminate were sent to organisations who work with communities along the border, and widespread targeted use was made of social media, particularly Twitter and Facebook, to raise awareness of the events. The second visit also made use of posters and flyers distributed in businesses and community hubs on both sides of the border. Despite all these efforts, attendance was disappointing at both events. The potential reasons for the limited attendance may be related to post-COVID reluctance to attend events in person, the time of year and perhaps a perceived lack of urgency about addressing challenges

to sustainability of educational provision in these communities. However, the quality of discussion at the events seemed not to be diminished by a smaller than expected turnout, and it may even have enhanced the engagement of those who did attend.

In all there were 10 attendees. Of those that completed the optional short biographic survey distributed after the conversation, 75% were female. In all, 25% identified as Protestants, 50% as Catholic and the remainder chose not to say. 13% lived within one mile of the border, and 25% between 1 and 5 miles. The remainder lived more than four miles from the border. 75% of those attending who responded to the biographic survey lived in Northern Ireland, with 25% living in Ireland.

Each of the Community Conversations was recorded using an online transcription service Otter (www.otter.ai) and the transcriptions were then corrected and analysed. It is the results of that thematic analysis that form the basis of this section of the report.

It should be noted that the views expressed in this report may not be fully representative of those who live along the border. There may be viewpoints that are not articulated here and, conversely, some viewpoints represented here may have been amplified because of the relatively small numbers involved. However, all the individuals who came to these

Community Conversations were frank and open about their experiences and their views, and this research provides an insight into at least some of the challenges and opportunities faced by border communities in Ireland.

Please note: the language used in the reports about this research utilise terminology

commonly used by respondents. For instance, the Republic of Ireland may be referred to as the Republic or the South, or just Ireland, while Northern Ireland will sometimes be termed the North. Similarly, schools to which primary pupils transfer may be called post-primary or secondary schools.

2. Border communities – a context for examining education provision along the border

Rural areas around the world are suffering from the dual impact of rural depopulation due to urbanisation and an ageing population. Rural areas of Ireland, North and South, are impacted by these global trends to a greater or lesser extent. Border communities in Ireland have suffered disproportionately from economic deprivation, relative isolation, and emigration. In Northern Ireland, there has also been a recent history of sectarian violence. There may be concerns on both sides of the border that Brexit will further exacerbate these challenges.

Despite the efforts of many organisations and individuals, rural borderlands between the Ireland and Northern Ireland are at greater risk of reduced and/or loss of public services, with detrimental impact on community life. There can also be limited economic opportunities for these rural border areas with a focus mainly on agriculture and associated

industries. Although both jurisdictions have different policies and pathways, many of these problems are common; the cross-border dimension, therefore, may help to establish the positioning of communities and their views as to what they feel is most important to them in maintaining their way of life.

While these are the challenges that rural border communities are believed to face as reflected by those who write about or support such communities, this research is designed to allow the communities themselves to share their stories, and to articulate the challenges and rewards of living along the border in Ireland.

2.0.1 Overview of challenges and opportunities of border living

The communities in this research share many of the challenges of rurality elsewhere but also encounter challenges and opportunities due to their location alongside an international border. While the establishment of a border between Northern Ireland and Ireland is a relatively recent phenomenon, the last century has seen periodic hardening of that border, alongside periods of debordering when its significance diminished greatly. There is currently increased uncertainty around the border, following Brexit and the subsequent protocols developed around East-West and North-South trade, alongside political tension and the collapse of regional government in Northern Ireland. The increased popular discussion about the likelihood or otherwise of a border poll is also creating some uncertainty and the communities living along the border are likely to be those most closely affected by this.

There is also evidence of particular adaptations to living in border communities. While these are not universal, and there are community members for whom the border does not impinge on their lives, many of those who live in these areas have developed mechanisms to address any challenges the border poses, and to take advantage of any opportunities which living close to an international border presents, such as travelling across the border to access retail or recreational outlets, or to exploit fuel price disparities. These impinge upon many aspects of life along the border, but are particularly clear when educational provision is considered.

2.0.2 The troubled history of the border

Despite the application of border checks on approved roads and railway crossings, the right to travel freely over the border between what became the Republic of Ireland and the UK, including Northern Ireland, was agreed in 1922 with the establishment of the Common Travel Area. The history of border regions was not a dominant narrative in the Community Conversations; nonetheless it formed an undercurrent to many of them. A number of respondents openly articulated the troubled history of their areas, including the impact this had on their communities and the degree of friction to movement that the creation of a border had produced. There are 208 crossing points (comprising roads, paths and dirt tracks) along the 310-mile border¹; this compares to just 137 crossings between the European Union countries and all countries to the east of that block, a distance of almost 6000 kilometres². As there was a need for border checks when the border was first established, many roads which crossed the two jurisdictions were 'unapproved'. While remaining open, these had neither formal customs huts nor were checks made on people and goods passing over the border but they were monitored for illicit use such as smuggling. Nonetheless, for many, unapproved roads were avoided

my understanding of the reason they're unapproved is because they didn't have customs huts at them so you weren't allowed to cross them and the customs guys used to sit and watch to see if people went across [and] then nab them if they did and search their cars and all that sort of thing.

¹ FactCheckNI (2018) Are there 208 Ireland-Northern Ireland border crossings? <https://factcheckni.org/topics/europe/are-there-208-ireland-northern-ireland-border-crossings/>

² BBC (2017) Reality Check: Ireland's Border and Brexit <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-40949424>

Border posts were rendered unnecessary when both Ireland and Northern Ireland were jointly in the European Union.

Once we became members of the European Union, there was no need for any of that any longer. So, there were no customs huts. There was none of that... it was free flowing...

This virtual absence of a border had earlier been altered from the late 1960s. Most unapproved roads were made impassable by the Security Forces early in 'The Troubles' (see Border Road Memories <http://www.borderroadmemories.com/>) by destroying bridges, cratering roads with explosives or putting physical barriers across crossing points. While the aim was to limit access back and forth across this permeable border for security reasons, the inconvenience for local residents was considerable. Farmers, for example, often had land on both sides of the border, and trade, shopping and kinship visits for all residents became much more challenging than before. To cross the border by vehicle was only possible at a small number of heavily fortified approved crossing points, which often necessitated long detours.

I remember a time when you when it was a physically impossible to get across that border [less than a mile away]... you know the unapproved roads as they were called were shut down or they were blown up. When I was a child, my father was a farmer and he would have grown arable crops across the border... he wasn't allowed to travel on unapproved roads so we would have had to do a long sweep right round to get to... the land he had taken for putting in potatoes and all sorts of things.

Routes that had been unapproved opened following the cessation of violence and remain open, allowing communities to freely travel across the border once again.

2.0.3 Characteristics of communities

There was considerable evidence from some respondents of family and other links across the border.

There's people [who] obviously have family, both sides of the border. And it's not a new thing. There's a place just down the road, [name of townland] was an unapproved road... there was a family there just on this side of the border who had this wee shop in the house... and people came from both sides of the border, you know, I mean, I'm told that during the war, you know, there was the rations and so on... and everybody congregated up at their place, you know, and so, I suppose border people are savvy people in some ways, you know what I'm saying? If they find an opportunity exists, then they use it

However, nationality still has an impact. One respondent talked about children in the local area joining sports clubs and taking part in sporting events freely on both sides of the border. For most, the border had no significant impact on these activities. However, if any of the children wanted to register for a UK or Irish national sporting organisation, they had to have a postcode in the relevant jurisdiction. This restricted options for membership. Additionally, nationality and place of residence also impacted on those children who wished to compete beyond regional and local competitions.

...they can't hold a championship title. Like so there's a Northern Ireland championship this weekend, and instead of entering 10, they've entered five in it because they're our [British] passport holders basically

2.04. Changes in perceptions about the border

The border has an impact on people socially and economically. One respondent who grew up in Northern Ireland commented

...my father was a haulage contractor. And I've never even thought about this before. Just that you've asked that question.... funny he had his haulage business... he had two offices... he had one in [settlement in Northern Ireland] and one in [settlement in Ireland]... you have to have dual links... dual citizenship... you have to have two places that you are living in... you have to be cloned.

For some residents, the border appeared to be a greater barrier than for others. A respondent, still resident in Northern Ireland said

when I was growing up, you were going to another country when you went across the border. That was how people saw it. You were heading South. You are going across the border, and it was an adventure to be going across the border. And I knew there was many people who never crossed it for generations, you know... but I don't think it holds the same... almost mystery as it used to, you know what I mean, people didn't know what went on across there.

Perceptions appear to have changed to a large degree and the border no longer seems to be a major feature restricting movement.

...you don't even know that you're across it you know, apart from maybe the road markings change or whatever. And I suppose banking and with the currency and everything now, you can use your credit card, and whatever, whereas before it used to be you had to have Punts or you had to have your Euro, whereas that even has just made it easier to go over and, and shop...

Some reduction of the division that the border created may have been as a consequence of closer alignment during post-conflict years with shared membership of the European Union. The closer alignment politically within the EU was enhanced by North-South bodies operating as a result of the Good Friday Agreement.

...definitely still it's still there, but it's not and people don't see it as an impediment. They actually see it as an enrichment to some extent to have those two, those two types. I certainly see it as that to have sort of an enrichment to draw on each other's experience if you know what I mean.

Some reluctance to cross the border for individuals in some communities seems to remain, particularly in Northern Ireland, even if they live close to it. One NI respondent explained

...there's definitely not the same impediment as they used to be. But I think people as far as the sort of the organisations or the, the social life that people enjoy, I think it's still largely within... on their own side of the border

Another respondent, while a minority view, commented that

I don't, personally I mean, I don't... I can't even remember when I had been last over the border.

There was also a recognition that the decision by the UK to leave the European Union, and the local political responses to that, have suggested a possible hardening of the border. Some communities may have borne the brunt of that uncertainty

Brexit would have had a huge impact, I'm sure on foreign communities and so on

However, Brexit and its political aftermath was also perceived to impact on community divisions more widely in these border areas

I don't know that it is so much specifically to do with borders. But I suppose Brexit has probably, you know, amplified that. Because obviously, things just aren't as easy as before. There's still a lot of political tension out there, definitely... there's no doubt about it. And I suppose it might be more visible in towns and in the cities... but in rural areas it is much more hidden. It's not as obvious but still everybody is aware of who's who and what's what.

2.0.5 Community links within jurisdictions

While community divisions seem to persist in border areas, particularly in Northern Ireland, and appear to be as deep or deeper than elsewhere, many respondents emphasised strong community links.

Talking about a club for young people, one Ireland respondent commented

every parent who came to me just really said the same... it was just brilliant that we have something... which is across the board, so no label or no bias attached to any of that, you know, just really grateful that there's another wee opportunity and go for it...

During this research, the research team sometimes struggled to find a neutral meeting venue – this was a more prominent issue in Northern Ireland. Some community representatives were keen to emphasise that their venue was open to the whole community:

...they make it as cross-community as possible so people are used to come through the doors. You know, everybody is used to coming through the doors, but so it's a good wee spot so even in the summer camp, that would be run.

There were occasions when it was clear that a perception that a venue was cross-community was not always shared by the other community and, even where there appeared to be mixed activities in some community centres, respondents did notice and discuss that friendship groups seemed largely to be located within their own communities. One respondent confirmed that children's friendship groups in a club in Northern Ireland largely revolved around school friends with parents most friendly with other parents of children at the same schools, which are largely divided by community affiliation

Exactly yeah. Yes, it isn't as if it is intentional... as soon as they divide into groups they are still [divided by community]... but it's [their] class at school as well... they still go with their wee group of school friends... It's a joke, right? ...and

that's the same [with] parents too, like it's who you're comfortable with. You're not going to walk away from your wee bunch of friends and try to make friends with a different bunch.

This respondent continued, reflecting on the lack of cross-community friendships but emphasising the lack of tension between the groups...

But at least they're still together and they're here... There's no... there's... there's no ice. There's no cuts. There's no... there's nothing like that.

2.0.6 Community links across the border

As we have seen, there are some who continue to see the border as a significant feature in their landscape and for those individuals, it can restrict movement.

I don't really be across the border or near the border itself. I suppose people do. I don't know... I just don't have that experience

Some see little reason to cross the border for social or economic reasons

people probably travel to Dublin for entertainment or something. But [I am] not really aware of any particular draw either way.

Others commented on the changes in the perception of the border among young border residents. One Northern Ireland resident said

yeah the border has been part of the psyche of everybody's life. But in recent years, you know that situation where you can travel freely and so on. While it's there, and maybe it's not there in the in the minds of young people as much as

it is in the minds of people of my age or whatever... I would say it's not in the minds of young people in the same way as it would be in my age group.

In some instances, the impact of the border is only felt occasionally. One respondent, commenting on a sporting club in one of the border settlements talked about the response by some parents if a young person wanted to compete at a higher level which would entail crossing the border.

...look, this is just a wee local club for local needs. You know, don't be expecting your Nadia Comăneci coming out of here... but every so often, you'd find an exceptional child that you think "Aha, yeah, this one could go a wee bit further". And that would be where I would take them to the club [across the border] but they don't really want to go into that, isn't it? and they go "Yeah, we'll see"... everything might not step over nicely.

This respondent conceded that the reluctance to cross the border might just be a function of increased distance rather than a concern about the border itself.

I'd say that time was one of the biggest limiting factors I don't think it's actually stepping over that wee line that's a huge thing

A number of respondents lament the restrictions the border had on their opportunities. They often compared it to having just a semicircle of prospects for socialising, shopping and other activities, unlike the opportunities for those not living near a border who have those opportunities equally in all directions – a full circle. One respondent living almost on the border, on the northern side, reflected on the pull towards the jurisdiction within which she lived...

...the way you come out of the house to turn right [further into NI]. You don't turn left [into Ireland]. I wouldn't even know the people to my left across the border. Because different... just even social activities. They go one way and I go the other. So that bothers me. Because I think if people perhaps who live 10 miles down the road, they have the full circle radius, whereas I do not. I have the semi-circle.

The impact of the border on activities seems to extend to forming relationships also, for some people. One Northern Ireland-based respondent discussed how her son would not consider having a relationship with someone from the other side of the border.

And I think actually he likes places where he knows... he likes familiarity... he likes his pack... he doesn't object to it. If we go on breaks, we were in Kerry for the Armagh match... he loved it... but dating in that wee circle... no.

Another respondent, resident in Ireland, considering the same phenomenon, wondered whether there might be a gender aspect to it.

...Is it a girl/boy thing? Because my I have one boy and he would be very similar [he] likes to be near home. Whereas the girls just have that wee drive and more so I don't know if it is a boy/girl thing or not. I don't know whether it's where you're placed, you know in the family or whatever, but certainly my girls would be a lot more [prepared to consider a relationship with someone from 'over the border']

Another respondent wondered whether that localism extended to other areas also

...but I've friends in Dublin with girls, and they [the girls] would say, "oh, you wouldn't date anyone from the country, it's too much hassle".

Part of the explanation may be to do with the potential spaces to meet others available along some parts of the border.

...you only know what you've been exposed to. Yes, and the teenage discos just maybe weren't South of the border....

2.0.7 Challenges for residents

There can be some challenges for border residents who do cross the border to shop, work or for social reasons.

My reasoning is we are both myself and my husband are both taxpayers in the North. And we live in a farm in the South. So, he's the main taxpayer in the South and everything's kind of for both sides of the border. So therefore, you know, if you look at it in terms of financial and employment, there's a certain entitlement that you should have and should be allowed, you know, but at the end of the day, a lot of things come down to postal code and addresses and stuff like that as well. You know, it's very complicated because you're declaring taxes [on] both sides of the border. And then where do you get [your services]? ...it's much more intricate because then, you know, you're entitled to your family allowance and stuff as well. So which one do you actually go to? ...you know, we go to the one where we live in which is technically in the South

Some relatively mundane restrictions can impact on mobility also

...you know, my [vehicle] insurance. Obviously, I can drive over the border, but not for work purposes, I'm restricted to the North with my policy. So, you know, there's always barriers.

One commonly expressed concern related to health provision. As one respondent living in Ireland put it, the different systems make navigation of healthcare a challenge for many border residents, and it often seems not to reflect the complex lives that some residents have working and living often in different jurisdictions.

Our children are at school in the North. We keep our doctor in the South to try and keep them registered. To get registered in the North you have to tell them lies so what truth do you tell them... where do you live? And then a year goes by and you haven't registered them anywhere. Now, where do you go for the orthodontist? You just, you kind of feel you don't want to milk any system. But you want to do it right. But there's no real right way to do it either without bending a rule here and there...

One Ireland-based respondent, reflecting on challenges of living on and across the border, suggested that

There's no real political... or sort of religious bias, but [there] definitely is... you know what, there is definite thing: there's passports, there's currency, there's bank accounts. It was shocking hard to open a bank account when I got married and moved here... like I ended up... I had one in [settlement in Ireland] from nearly a decade before that when I was working there, and I thought, [I will] keep the one in the South because its handier.

Another respondent seemed to suggest something of a closed mindset in some border communities. New to the area in which they now live, this individual attributed some of the success in introducing social innovation to being a 'blow-in' (someone not from the area).

There was also some evidence of border residents being unsettled by recent uncertainty around the border

on one hand, there's not supposed to be these restrictions. And then you do find them and then Brexit definitely has, you know, changed it. So, a farmer that comes in for his tea once a week... he's giving out about the [cost of] milk and the butter and, you know of course, this whole thing about the protocol and one thing and another

2.0.8 Changes in local populations

There was evidence that some of the border communities had experienced recent social change particularly with the movement of newcomers to the area. However, this seemed to be localised, and was concentrated in those communities where work was available, particularly in agricultural processing. Other, potentially more rural, areas were little affected in that way.

Over the last 5/6/7 years, we have had maybe three newcomer children that have just stayed a short time... they were Romanian, so they were travelling about, but no, we wouldn't have a lot of newcomers. I know [name of a neighbouring town] would have more I suppose. There's more industry and employment in that area. So no... I suppose a lot of our children are coming from a farming community.

Another resident commented

[name of a nearby border village] is Bulgarian Roma to a large extent. You know there's a lot of newcomers [there] and in [nearby city]. So, you don't get them here to the same extent.

One of the reasons may be the limited rural transport provision.

They come here and they find [name of village] is very quiet. There aren't transport links, there aren't any jobs. It's a sleepy village.

While the presence of newcomers has been concentrated in certain locations, another feature appears to have been a recent, although limited, degree of return migration.

I suppose [name of settlement] would be a population... would be older [although]... we have some families that have moved back home and built on land at home. And they've maybe lived in [more distant settlements distant from the border] or whatever for a few years, and then they've married and settled back

2.1 Education along the border

The focus of this research is to examine educational issues experienced in Northern Ireland and Ireland, and to explore how these impact on the social, cultural and economic outcomes for children and young people and their families in both jurisdictions. Adopting a collective approach to explore contemporary issues on a cross-border basis affords a

unique and valuable opportunity to coalesce knowledge, expertise and skills through a co-design process involving the project team, schools and local communities to better understand the experiences of education and, in particular educational provision, in border communities. It allows for an exploration of the extent to which these experiences for young people and their families are shared or divergent, as well as the extent of community interaction from each side of the border in relation to schooling.

An examination of enrolment numbers would suggest that schools in rural regions of Ireland, on both sides of the border, may have issues of long-term sustainability. For example, in Northern Ireland, the number of school-age children in rural areas has been projected to fall by around 6% between 2018 and 2027³. In Ireland, while the population as a whole has increased by 4.8% between 2011 and 2016, most of that has been in 'independent urban towns'. 'Rural areas' grew by only 1.7% and 'remoter rural areas' actually lost population, declining by 0.6%. The census also shows that rural areas in Ireland have fewer young people – that section of the population most likely to have families of primary school age⁴. It is likely that the rural border areas targeted in this study are experiencing some loss of population, although the degree to which that is occurring will vary from place to place. In turn, these pressures may impact on rural schools, particularly primary schools. While the data suggests potential issues, this research is designed to give a voice to local people to allow them to articulate what the real issues are for them, and how these might be best addressed.

3 NISRA Statistical Bulletin (2020) 2018 based Population Projection for areas within Northern Ireland <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/SNPP18-Bulletin.pdf>

4 Central Statistics Office (2023) *Urban and Rural Life in Ireland, 2019* <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-urli/urbanandrurallifeinireland2019/agesexandgeographicaldistribution/>

Despite continued division along community lines in schooling on both sides of the border, there is an almost complete absence of schools which are designed to educate the different communities together. The only examples tend to be in urban centres and most are inaccessible to potential learners across the border. For example, there are Educate Together schools in Letterkenny and Ardee, but both are around 20 kms from the border. Similarly, there are few Integrated schools close to the border except in urban centres such as Derry or Enniskillen, the latter some 20 kms from the border. There is evidence that there is some change within individual schools, albeit small. As two school Principals, each representing a different school ethos in the same settlement, said:

each of us have within our school, children who are from mixed relationship, you know

Mixed relationships, once rare in Ireland, appear to be becoming much more common, and this may herald some change in the composition of the population as a whole, and potentially increase pressures for schools to loosen their denominational ties.

2.1.1 Small school characteristics and the sense of community

Many of the respondents valued the rural schools in their areas and those who were, or had been, parents of children at these schools, articulated the benefits of a small school setting in their children's education. School leaders also articulated the advantages:

we have that kind of family atmosphere; I know all the children. I teach them all at some stage as they come through... and I would like to think we can offer as much as what a large school can offer. You

know, our kids were in [capital city of a neighbouring country] there a few weeks ago for a residential, they're at various football tournaments and sporting fixtures and things so I'd like to think they get a flavour of everything that a larger school can get. Just there's more one to one, you know, from our pupil teacher ratios.

Another commented

...I would like to think our schools can offer as equally good an education as a school in the town or the city ... in fact, we can offer more because we know the needs of our children and our PTRs [Parent Teacher Ratios] are lower... our children are sitting in classes of maybe 20/22 whereas you could go into the town, they're sitting in a class of maybe 30 or 30 plus...

In a related point about the personal touch that it is perceived that a small school can offer, one teacher respondent argued that

I think there's a social element too, and a personal development element of being in a small school... the quiet child is given their place [and is] able to develop, you know, and also special needs children, they can get attention that - no harm to any teacher - is very difficult to give in the larger school in the large classroom.

Small schools have long been described as being unable to offer as wide a range of activities as schools with higher enrolments, largely because of pressures on staff⁵. However, respondents with experience teaching in such schools seemed to think that was not the case:

I would like to think our we can offer every bit as much and as I said, with the different

5 Central Advisory Council for Education (1967) Children and their Primary Schools. *The Plowden Report*. London: HMSO

clubs and residentials and trips and things that our children are able to avail of.

A school leader reflected on the movement to rationalise primary schools, particularly in Northern Ireland, and the potential threat to those schools below the enrolment threshold, initially established in the Burns Report (2001) and now one of the sustainability criteria for rural primary schools in Northern Ireland:

...we talked about that magic 105 [enrolment number]... you know, which we're lucky that we're at that point now. But historically, we wouldn't have been... I suppose just to look at the area that we're serving and if our schools are taken out of the community, like, yeah, how far our children have to travel how far our children have to travel, you know, to avail of their primary education.

This would accord with some of the research pointing to small rural schools being at the "heart of the villages ...involving the entire community"⁶.

Were a school to close in a rural area, particularly one with the additional challenges that a border community might face, this will also have an impact on local employment within those schools. One school governor commented on an individual who had to move schools several times after closures. A school governor explains

I was on the Board of Governors of [placename] primary school, which just closed two years ago. And one of the teachers in it had been a teacher in [placename] primary school, which closed a number of years before that. And now she works [in local primary school] with you one day in the week. So, you

know, there's communities that have been damaged by this

The perceived mechanism for closing schools also featured in the conversations and there was a concern about the impact on school enrolments, were there even the slightest hint that a small school might be under threat. A school governor in Northern Ireland gave a detailed example:

...there has to be something done to promote the rural schools... not to try and actually take them down. And what I often found... I found this in [name of school] certainly once the Education Authority announces a plan or as a development plan, where a school is actually named within it... well, I remember when that happened to [name of school]. The [local newspaper] the next week its headline was "[name of school] set to close". Now, EA didn't close [name of school], [name of school] closed itself. And I think that's, to be fair, that's what they set out to do... you create the doubt... what parent is going to send their child to a school, which the paper has said is going to close in two or three years time? And so, the numbers start to dwindle, it's destabilised straightaway, and so therefore, I think there has to be a look at how you can actually sustain and promote you know, primary schools in rural areas because if everybody's getting in their car and heading to [name of town] or [another town] or [yet another town], you know, I think it doesn't help the community.

⁶ Autti, O. and Hyry-Beihammer, E.K. (2014) School Closures in Rural Finnish Communities. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 29(1)

It is notable that threats of school closures were only raised by Northern Ireland-based respondents in these Community Conversations, and earlier phases of this research had suggested that even very small schools in Ireland felt reasonably secure as to their future. While a policy of primary school rationalisation in rural areas in Ireland was recommended in 2013⁷, it was not enacted, despite falling birth rates and rural depopulation affecting there just as much as Northern Ireland. Ireland has a high proportion of primary schools in relation to its population⁸ and is said to have the highest proportion of small schools in Europe with nearly half of primary schools having four teachers or fewer⁹. Despite this, there appears to be little appetite from politicians to close these schools. One education commentator referred to the 2013 report by Ireland's Department of Education recommending the closure of 200 small schools, a suggestion that was quickly dismissed by other government ministers. As the commentator put it, "...there are no votes in closing schools. Today schools are closed only with the consent of parents or its board of management"¹⁰. On the other hand, Northern Ireland politicians seem further removed from decisions around planning for school closures, even though it is ultimately the decision of the Minister of Education in Northern Ireland to ratify such proposals.

Small schools also act as community hubs in some areas, often in the evenings, although it is clear that COVID has impacted on schools being available in this way. A Principal of a

Controlled school in Northern Ireland reported

...pre COVID we would have had things like maybe keep fit class. Or whatever. And [we have] a good relationship with the church and we would use their facilities, they could use our facilities. And then we've Holiday Bible Club now running in June time. So yeah, the building would be... it's just not locked at three o'clock and nobody else gets in you know...

For other schools in Northern Ireland, COVID-19 disruption continues. Another Principal said

I've or haven't recently [held any community events at the school], like we would have had at one stage. People coming in to do computers, you know, somebody coming out to take a computer class or something like that with parents who wanted to upskill more or something like that, but certainly not since COVID. We haven't really.

The recognition that continued education provision in an area, especially a rural border area with the additional pressures on such communities, was articulated clearly, with the sentiment that schools – and in rural areas that is almost always primary schools – were the 'beating heart' of these communities. A community member argued that

...young people are the future of any community. And, you know, that's the thing that the community in [placename] and the surrounding area want [is] young people

7 Department of Education and Skills (2013) *Value for Money Review of Small Primary Schools* <https://assets.gov.ie/31347/0bec734bca434bb0a5e5de612a072016.pdf>

8 Perry, C. and Love, B. (2013) Rural schools. Research and Information Service, *Research Paper 27*, 13. p.19 <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2013/education/2713.pdf>

9 O'Brien, C. (2019) Ireland's small schools: Inside the battle for their future. *Irish Times* 29th June 2019

<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/ireland-s-small-schools-inside-the-battle-for-their-future-1.3940727>

10 O'Brien, C. (2019)

here. And you know if there was like closure or something, I think the community breaks, you know...

2.1.2 Challenges for education provision

The main challenge articulated by those involved in running schools or in their governance related to the perceived inadequacy of funding for schools. While most of the responses raising funding concerns in this part of the research came from respondents in Northern Ireland, there is evidence for funding concerns in Ireland as well. In 2016, a report into value for learning in small Irish Protestant primary schools recommended a more nuanced model of funding, especially for small schools¹¹. More recently, it was reported that Ireland's total expenditure on educational institutions as a share of GDP was the lowest for Primary, Secondary and post-Secondary non-Tertiary education institutions in all OECD countries at just 2.3% - the EU average is 3.2%¹².

Northern Ireland respondents highlighted the issues for them:

There's always going to be worries about money.

I'm part of a Principals' Group on Facebook and you can see large schools in Belfast, rural schools and schools of all sizes you know, we're just conscious of our budget and how far we can stretch that and a lot of the additional funding we've received in the past, you know, that's all gone.

There was a particular concern about the impact of reduced/declining funding on some of the core services that the school offers.

SEN funding... we did get a little bit this year, but it's about 50% of what we got last year. So, it's eventually dwindling out you know, and we would have used that to release our SENCO to work with children and work on policies and things you know, so yeah... it's just being able to survive on what you're given.

Any budget allocations which supported schools working together are also under threat.

And Shared Education budget. [That] would have been a good support to both schools [in a partnership] as well to facilitate that collaboration, you know

It could be argued that the impact of declining funding on small communities is particularly acute as physical, human and other resources are by default already reduced in such communities.

2.1.3 Perceptions of education 'over the border'

Whether viewed from Northern Ireland or from Ireland, there were a number of views expressed about education provision on the other side of the border, with variations in terms of understanding the system in the other jurisdiction.

One parent who grew up in Northern Ireland admired the system in Ireland that gave greater breadth in education for longer

¹¹ Lodge, A. and Tuohy, D. (2016) *Small Schools Value for Learning Summary Report*. p.5

https://www.dcu.ie/sites/default/files/church-of-ireland-centre/2016_small_schools_summary_report_1.pdf

¹² OECD Indicators *Education at a Glance* (2022) p.254 <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/deliver/3197152b-en.pdf?itemId=%2Fcontent%2Fpublication%2F3197152b-en&mimeType=pdf>

I grew up outside [a Northern Ireland city near the border] and I always was kind of envious of the southern education system because you got to do a greater span of A levels [the Leaving Certificate], you got to do seven or eight without putting yourself in a hat. You know, at that stage of your life when you didn't know what you wanted, you know.

In terms of the Leaving Certificate, while some parents in Northern Ireland favoured the wider range of subjects than were studied at A Level in Northern Ireland, there was also a recognition that learners of that age in Ireland were put under considerable pressure, and an awareness that the education authorities were seeking to implement change.

...it's like because Leaving Cert can be... I don't know any parents ever said "Aye, they got on great and they loved it you know" [laughter]... they just have had to work their socks off..... It's pressured like... it's that way, or the highway... they are just starting to develop that I think

There was some perception from Southern residents that Northern Ireland was better developed when it came to vocational education

I think it's really attractive to people coming North... the North is much more highly developed in terms of vocational choices, you know, in the range of subjects that are still awarded a certain kind of academic award. But you know that's integrated into all sort of trades

The curriculum of the primary schools on each side of the border was also perceived to be different.

Subtle differences like primary [in Ireland] you know, you do the history of, like [the local area], they do the history of Ireland and they [cover] everything really from this century back. They're going to everything of the history in Ireland but primary school the North you go into the history of the monarchy and, you know, everything [about] the UK system and everything so that their historical education is completely different. And I find that as that was something that blew me away at the start "You're not learning that? You shouldn't be doing that". And it was the one [child] who ironically has moved to primary school [from the South to the North] and she was really sort of staunch.

The same respondent reflected on the time her child had spent in a Catholic ethos National school in Ireland, where she lived, before transferring to a Catholic Maintained primary school in Northern Ireland:

She came back talking about the Easter Rising and 1916 and, you know, Michael Collins. Oh yeah... see those Marita Conlon-McKenna books... They are deadly like... it started with the potato famine and we're actually reading Rebel Sisters, they had to read that during lockdown. So, I went through it with them and I actually really enjoyed reading it with them but I can't believe that you're going into this much depth of primary school. And then she said "but Mummy, they're from both sides that family... because there is the daughter that is away to London, and there is the brother... and there's the mummy who is just disgusted with them all and is hiding under the table and doesn't want to know"... and she is saying this, you know as a 9- to 10-year-old, it was very good but it's just I never did half of that.

Another parent, noting further curricular differences between the two systems, perceived a lower requirement for Irish proficiency in Northern Ireland primary schools

I asked [child's name] to see her Irish: "Tá an cailc ar an tábla" [The chalk is on the table]. We did that about six years ago!

One Northern respondent reflected on the variation of requirements for teachers on each side of the border, suggesting some barriers to movement of teachers at primary level.

Teaching is different because... you're going into primary you need to have your Irish or a certain level of Irish. [Another respondent interjected: do you need that in the North?] No, I don't think there's anything... I think it's only the CCMS schools that you need the Catholic teaching certificate... they're still wee limitations there's still some extra things down there...

There was limited knowledge of other school governance arrangements other than the sector and jurisdiction with which they had personal experience. An exception was one respondent from Northern Ireland who had visited a range of schools in both jurisdictions. She observed

An Educate Together school... there is a true acceptance inclusive warmth about those schools. I could sit and watch them to see what do they do. How did they do it?...

2.1.4 Education links within jurisdictions

There was some evidence of links between schools in some communities along the border. One Community Conversation participant based in Ireland talked about a community choir of learners from different schools along the border in the South, singing in the RDS, a large venue in Dublin.

...choirs then from different schools came together, and... Peace Proms that was it. And it was brilliant. It was fantastic. And I think when children are singing, they're expressing themselves and it was a brilliant, brilliant experience. But... it was just people coming together and it wasn't necessarily under the umbrella of education, but yeah, everything about it was just pure education for the children... and that was something... And it wasn't even... it was still sort of practising in their primary. It would have been lovely if it was more of a local event and they could have come together. You know... but, you know, it was the kids from... that semi-circle...

Overall, there was limited evidence of linkage between schools in Ireland, although that may be a reflection of the lack of need for such linkages, whether cross-community or not.

One school leader in Northern Ireland commented

We engage in Shared Education with [name of another school] in the village here, which works well because both schools are within walking distance. I know when in the past other schools that have been further away and it proves difficult... you're having to transport and all of that...

A teacher in a school explained how the collaboration in which she was involved worked in practice

... our expertise varies [the other school staff] might do the drama and I might do the ICT side of things.... Yeah, I might have started with the lesson off and [name of teacher from partner school] might have done a little bit and I would have done the conclusion. So, you know, team teaching

Another example was

Last year we did a study of the village you know, and two classes went together on a walk around the village to see the historical things you know, sort of that idea of community spirit and litter picks and things like that

Despite some examples of shared activities emerging in the Community Conversations, there was evidence that such links were under threat, given recent budget cuts. Nonetheless, schools appeared keen to continue the links, albeit scaled down from what went before, and there was a general agreement that shared expertise could contribute to sustaining shared activities to the benefit of the education of all children in an area.

I suppose geographically, we're lucky because the schools are so close. I know that our Shared Education funding has ceased. That was such a big issue. That was the PEACE IV project but I think there is something coming you know, in the future, but until that comes, I know that's something we can pick up and we can take on and do ourselves. Okay, we won't have our icebreaker days where we go and they're paddleboarding and canoeing and all

those fantastic things that the funding allows you to do, but to a lesser extent, we can still continue those partnerships.

Another school leader in Northern Ireland recognised the changes to Shared Education that would be required with the removal of funding

I would say, in some way it will continue [even if funding ceased]. It wouldn't be as... obviously it's not going to be the same because the funding isn't there.

It should be noted that funding has been available to small border schools. One example is through Collaboration and Sharing in Education (CASE)¹³. CASE aims to promote good relations amongst children and young people in school settings, through promoting curriculum-based contact between learners and teachers. Open to all schools in the six border counties of Ireland and all schools in Northern Ireland not already involved in the DSC Signature Project for Shared Education, it involves the Education Authority in Northern Ireland and Léargas, a non-profit organisation wholly owned by Ireland's Department of Education and Skills, working together. It is supported by the EU's PEACE Programme and managed by the Special EU Programme Body, SEUPB.

In parallel the Minister for Education in Ireland launched a two-year action research project, the Small Schools Project¹⁴, aimed at supporting small rural schools. This encourages small schools to cluster together in local groups fostering collaboration, identifying shared challenges and trialling innovative solutions. Only one of the project clusters is in a border county, Co Donegal, comprising four two-teacher schools, of

¹³ <https://www.sharededucation.org.uk/>

¹⁴ <https://smallschoolsproject.com/>

which the highest enrolment is 25, and only one of the schools in that cluster is relatively close to the border and it is located relatively distant from the other three. Nonetheless, initial feedback from that cluster appears very positive¹⁵.

There was also evidence of wider sharing between communities in Northern Ireland. One Principal identified instances of pupil contact outside school that could be used to further develop collaborative initiatives outside:

we share the Education Authority bus sometimes some of your boys and girls will be on the bus as well... so they know faces and know friends. They've been through playgroup together as well. So, I suppose there is someone out there you know, they remember the face and just rekindling those friendships.

Another respondent talked about the wider community involvement

the switching on of the Christmas tree lights in the village which both schools were involved in that together. So yeah, there just is that positive vibe.

and

Remember, there used to be the senior citizens' party... we used to have to go and sing for the senior citizens but I don't think that has been on now... that's funding again...

This collaborative work in Northern Ireland was seen as beneficial but there was some evidence of resistance to closer linkages. One school governor in a Controlled school said

But there is a richness in having schools that meet the needs of the community which they serve. I mean, we would be very supportive of [name of Catholic Maintained school], you know, in saying that we believe that those children deserve to be able to go to school in their home area just as well as every other child in the area does...

Some expressed the view that the community was stronger with schools being separate and, while there was support for collaboration between schools, there was a fear that anything further would lead to the loss of identity of one community. The same governor argued:

...people don't want to feel that their tradition or what they believe in, what they hold dear, is sort of being undermined, if you know what I mean. And so long as we can do that in the way that one respects the other... which I believe is a real strength of this village.

Another comment was clear in the perceived threat to the identity of the community

I certainly know the two schools are very pragmatic and if there's something you can do to help each other, or to increase the experience, so that education experience of the pupils [is enhanced], you will do it but that's not at the expense of losing your own identity and holding your own ethos. And I think that's the key to how we move forward... that there is an individual identity and ethos of those schools, but [they can] work together in terms of things that can enrich the experience of the children that that you have...

¹⁵ Donegal Cluster Feedback <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1JJAQDryLjCc27d0zYOUdC6uEFWACOE40/view?pli=1>

Additionally, while it was clear that many parents valued linkages across the community, school leaders and governors appeared to be careful to balance these for fear of antagonising some of the parents. When asked whether parents appreciated the cross-community linkages between the schools in the area, a principal replied

I think that they do... to make it clear that both schools have the role that you know... we have our identity and our ethos, you know, and we're respecting each other whenever we're delivering that programme.

The school governor emphasised the need for a degree of caution in reassuring parents with regard to school collaboration

...it's important that you don't overstep the mark, in terms of, you know... you don't go to a place where parents say, "oh, no, no, no, no, that's just too far"... where then they see it as a threat to the ethos if you know what I mean, or that..., it's just you've got to be sensitive about how you do that.

Nonetheless, there were signs of progress since early attempts to encourage collaboration between schools in Northern Ireland. In 1992, education reforms had introduced Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) into schools as a statutory part of the curriculum but, while the themes were mandatory, cross-community contact was an optional strategy¹⁶. The resistance to that cross-community contact appears to have reduced. A former Principal recollected

I remember way back, we've moved massively because I remember when it started, maybe, I suppose 20/25 years ago, [Teacher respondent: It's more. Is that EMU?...] is it more than that? Aye, it was EMU. So, all that stuff that started back then when the very idea that you know, [that] you would get involved with another school from a different tradition... I mean, there were parents who said "I am not sending them there any more". They took their children and sent them somewhere else... that existed... so we have moved way beyond that now...

When any thoughts about the forging of a closer relationship, or even an amalgamation of two schools from different traditions was raised, there was considerable pressure against that from the governor of a Controlled school, which is worth quoting in full:

if you pushed it too far as they might see it... saying all that... if somebody came in and said "Right. We have come to the conclusion that there's no room for two schools in this village. We'll need to close both of them and open a new one". I think that's when relationships would break down, because everybody's content in the fact that their tradition, their ethos is respected. And so therefore, if somebody said we're gonna, you know, that's all gonna go now. I just think you're asking for trouble... you would actually undo all the good that has been done... I think even it's not even just bringing a Maintained and a Controlled together. I think even you know, if you were to bring two Controlled together... two small schools to say, "right, well, you know, we'll close both, we'll create a new school"... and

¹⁶ Smith, A. and Robinson, A. (1996) *Education for Mutual Understanding: The Initial Statutory Years*
<https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/csc/reports/mutual.htm>

we've had these discussions before, you know, because when you have to merge staff together, you have to decide on the new uniform, you have to decide on the new identity. I think just bringing any kind of school, whatever sector, together is going to be a challenge, regardless and that's without even looking at religion and beliefs... because nobody wants to give up what they have, you know, especially if you were to merge and just go to one site, how do you decide well, we'll go to that site and we'll close that one and then it suddenly becomes "Oh, it's their school"...

Another individual, working in the border area where this Community Conversation was held but living in a different border area gave a similar view of the importance of place and the value of a school to that community.

I can give an example... in the parish I live in there are three small schools. It's all in one parish, a rural parish and you know, like, 30 years ago they mooted that "let's all amalgamate". We're all the one parish [yet we are] three separate areas and the schools just would not do it... and now there are still three separate schools. You know, the identity of your area is very strong. So, it's nothing to do with religion. You know, they said it's [all one] community and yeah, and that they belong to this area, and that's their community and their club. And surely they are all are one parish against others. You know, when in sport and all that type of thing, but they [smaller areas within parishes] have their own identity.

Localism and the strong pull of 'place', particularly for rural residents, is evident. This is more finely grained than even than at a parish level which, for some communities, may be taken to define their 'home place'. This

view, if widely held, may be a powerful factor in impeding any move towards rationalising school provision whether across sectors or not.

It is notable that these pressures were not articulated by respondents from Ireland, at least not in these Community Conversations. This may reflect a lesser emphasis on community division and a greater respect for diversity of identities there, but may also be reflective that any agenda of rationalising small rural primary schools appears less likely to be implemented there for reasons described earlier.

2.1.5 Educational links across the border

While this research found that the border was a significant barrier for some individuals who often viewed the other side as somewhere to be avoided, for others it did not seem to impact on their lives and they travelled freely on both sides. The border and the prospect, however distant, of its removal, is considered a threat to some people on the northern side. One former teacher in a Controlled school close to the border was clear about its continued influence.

...the border area is a very complex area in many ways. And although... we can travel and all the rest of it still freely but it's still in the consciousness. It's the consciousness of people that it is there and that people don't want to feel that their tradition or what they believe in... what they hold dear is sort of being undermined, if you know what I mean.

For other respondents the border seemed to have little impact on their lives. One parent resident in Ireland described their schooling arrangements

I don't even know it's legal to say what we do [laughter] like we love the [name of county] side of the border.. and my son goes to [placename] national school in County [name of border county in Ireland] and my daughter moved this year in September to [Maintained school name] primary school in [town in Northern Ireland]. And my eldest daughter goes to [name of Maintained post-primary school in Northern Ireland, accessible from the border]

A principal of a Controlled primary school in Northern Ireland reflected on her intake, which was restricted to the northern side of the border.

Our catchment area would be really a five- or six-mile radius around the school [which would include households in Ireland]. We don't have any children that come across and I suppose it's because the education systems are different. You know, the year groups are different... they start maybe school at a different age and they stay at primary school for an extra year. So, I suppose if somebody chops and changes and jumps across then it kind of messes up their you know, the year group that they're in and whatever. So no, I haven't noticed and I'm in [name of school] 21 years. And we haven't had any children now that have [crossed the border to go to school]

A retired school Principal of a post-primary school did recall one instance of a family who had crossed the border to attend his Controlled school in Northern Ireland

And I can think of one family I had in my school which, you know, the mother was born in Northern Ireland but they live just across the border. And she was a past

pupil of my school so all her children came through. So you know, if there's connections like that they will cross the border, but she would still see herself as somebody from Northern Ireland who actually just lives across that wee stretch there, you know...

There was evidence of past collaborations between schools on each side of the border. One Northern Ireland teacher said

In the past we had a programme or maybe where we were working with southern schools... I can't remember what it was called, I was on maternity leave. So, yes, it was 16 years ago. It was funding, yeah, digital cameras. Yeah, camcorders. And yeah, video conferencing equipment.

However, most schools which were represented in these Community Conversations seemed to have limited current links and schools were generally getting on with what they viewed as their core role of educating the young people in their care, in the absence of connections with other schools. Reflecting on primary schools in Ireland, one parent said

My lived experience: none. None, you're isolated in the schools and that is it. You may as well be maybe Saudi Arabia 10 miles down the road you just... what goes on in it? You never would see them, you never would hear tell of them...

Similarly, another parent living just on the Northern Ireland side of the border considered:

mixing with the neighbours?... in my experience, what was going on the wee school three miles from me never, never entered my mind. Likewise, five miles other direction in the North, it never entered my

mind: what are they up to? I don't know if there's [a lack of an] inquisitiveness there. I suppose there's a security that you don't have to...

Another parent whose children attended schools in Ireland suggested that the lack of contact between schools appeared to be general, and not just associated with border locations.

My children never at primary school would have mixed with the other local primary schools or primary schools in Northern Ireland... in post primary schooling they both go now to single sex schools [in Ireland]. So they're in Transition Year... there was collaboration between the boys' school and the girls' school but I think that's the Transition Year thing. I don't know if it's productive to education [laughter]. But no, not within the primary school. I think it's not just a border county thing

One Northern Ireland parent suggested that the move to increase competition between schools for enrolment, often a diminishing resource especially in rural areas, may have influenced the lack of collaboration between schools and also the lack of any tangible incentive for schools to engage with other schools

I suppose for some schools, there was an element of competition for numbers. And for others... for primary schools in particular, they're just in their own wee bubble and you know, with that programme [a previous initiative encouraging collaboration] there was a

bit of an incentive for maybe a new pitch or a new playground or something that both of them [they] could then share at the end of the programme. So there needed to be a real incentive, but that's across Northern Ireland, and I don't think it's necessarily just border counties....

Teacher professional learning opportunities in border counties are, understandably, delivered in each jurisdiction separately. Those events provide teachers with rare opportunities to engage with others from the area on an informal level, but there are no opportunities to share ideas and expertise with teachers in the other jurisdiction.

they would meet in the Education Centre to local teachers together as a cluster, but not North/South.

This contrasts with opportunities for Teacher Educators to share ideas and to conduct research together in a cross-border organisation established by the Good Friday Agreement. This body, SCOTENS – the Standing Conference on Teacher Education, North and South, has been assessed as being of considerable value in improving Teacher Education on both sides of the border¹⁷, and it may be that a similar network for school practitioners would also be of value.

In Phase 1 of this research, there was a lot of discussion about collaboration between schools which shared the same parish, often meaning connections with schools on the other side of the border, as the parish boundaries and the national boundaries are sometimes not identical. However, it was noted that these connections were generally confined to

¹⁷ Clarke, L., Galvin, C., Campbell, M., Cowan, P., Hall, K., Magennis, G., O'Doherty, T., Purdy, N. and Abbott, L. (2020) Assessing the value of SCOTENS as a cross-border professional learning network in Ireland, using the Wenger-Trayner value-creation framework. *Oxford Review of Education* <https://www.stran.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Purdy-2020-Assessing-the-value-of-SCOTENS-as-a-cross-border-professional-learning-network-in-Ireland-using-the-Wenger-Trayner-value-creation-framework.pdf>

preparation for sacraments. There does not seem to be any greater movement of learners between schools in the same parish than happens across the border between schools not related to parishes. This was also reflected in these Community Conversations:

there are lots of parishes that meander across the border, and people have no difficulty going to a service in that one or this one. But then when they go to school, it's this one because it's this side and you know, they don't have that opportunity [of attending a school across the border]... the idea that the circle can go to the school [in contrast to the semi-circle of opportunity that some perceive along the border], I think would be fantastic. But there's a huge issue of curriculum and then the age thing... They were open to having these other children coming [referring to proposed cross-border school amalgamations], but they weren't going to change the curriculum. Obviously, you'd have teachers trying to do two things at once, but it just didn't work because of the difference in the structure of the schools.

A thread in this Community Conversation then emerged, discussing the likelihood of cross-border solutions for schools. There was general scepticism. One border respondent suggested

Any prospects of cross border 'amalgamations' of schools... it's not actually possible to make it happen.

Some even felt that the educational authorities on each side of the border were missing opportunities to develop their systems by not building structures which had been shown to work in the other jurisdiction. One northern resident said

...there's a report relatively recently that looks at particularly some of the DEIS [Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools] school stuff. And everybody in the North was part of the conversation looking at it. And they then went "lovely". [laughter] But didn't [implement any change]... you know the whole point of that is to actually look at the really good stuff and go "we're gonna steal that from you"... I mean, there's not that huge difference between people on one side than there are on the other so if something works really well with one group, [murmured agreement] there should be an opportunity to at least try it with the other group and see... the system doesn't actually allow for a coherent kind of mixing.

2.1.6 Mobility for education

There was evidence in some Community Conversations of a parental willingness to consider availing of educational opportunities across the border, and from others who were currently using schools across the border. While all of these instances involved movement from South to North, the numbers involved in Conversations were relatively small, so there may well be movement in the other direction not encountered in this part of the research. One parent resident in Ireland provided the trajectory of her children, navigating the different ages of transition from primary to post-primary school. One of her children moved at 11 to attend a post-primary school in Northern Ireland. This is a year before primary education is completed in Ireland, but the reason given for the move at that stage was so that she will be the same age as her peers in the post-primary school in Northern Ireland. Some other children, from the year above, in the same National school

in the Republic had remained in primary school until the age of 12 before transferring to Northern Ireland for post-primary education.

She's in [name of the National school in Ireland near to their residence]. She's going to [name of post-primary school in Northern Ireland]. Three other girls and one boy [from her class] and one boy and one girl [from the class above, in the same school] from there are also moving this year to secondary school [in Northern Ireland]. So, they are leaving the South a year early and they're coming to the North. But, it's you know, it's mainly location, location. That's why the [local Controlled post-primary school in Northern Ireland], you've such a great school there and it is nice for them to know that they are coming out and they're getting on a wee bus and coming straight to here or getting connected and straight home you know, just... geography is a huge thing, a huge thing for us as well.

Another Ireland parent considered later educational opportunities when making educational choices at primary level, feeling that moving jurisdiction for primary or post-primary education does not disadvantage them, when they may eventually be choosing higher education options and which Universities to attend.

...they do go North... it is cheaper and they do have the same advantage as any Ulster child. I think, you know, I'm not sure of the ins and outs of it, but it doesn't stop them going to Jordanstown [former site of Ulster University campus] or wherever, they definitely do. There's doesn't seem to be much limitation there.

The cost of a university education was also discussed

You know, it was always traditionally [been] a lot more expensive to go to university in the South than it was North you know, you'd always got... I don't know what the grants are, and what the opportunities are for funding...

and one respondent from the North recalled a lot of students who lived in Ireland on her course.

whenever I went to university and went to Coleraine so there were a lot of people actually from the South, an awful lot... and mainly girls for whatever reason.

While this might suggest a lot of movement across the border for education, it was not universal. It also appears to be the case, for some respondents, when it comes to tertiary education in either direction.

University... I could probably count maybe on four hands how many kids go South... the northern children are inclined... the majority to go across the water to the UK or stay at home [attending a Northern Ireland university]. Some, not many, in each year group... my boys are in their early 20s. Not many have gone South and yet I've nephews South of the border who if you say "Would you consider Belfast?" No, [they] just wouldn't even consider Coleraine....

The same is true in some instances in primary schools. Two teachers in Northern Ireland, discussing enrolment in their schools in the same village close to the border, one in a Maintained school and the other a Controlled, agreed that movement across the border for education was unusual in their experience

Controlled school teacher: Do you have any children [name of other teacher] that travel across?

Maintained school teacher: No, no, no,

Controlled school teacher: And we haven't had, like yourselves. There was one child who we think maybe was in the South, but he had an address here. And then he had been in the South, and then he left again. But that is years ago. No, we don't have any

If there is movement, as previously noted, this tends to be individuals who have knowledge of the system having worked in it, or been educated themselves in it. Alternatively, there may be decisions which are made on the basis of work location or kinship links. One parent living in Northern Ireland reflected

...thinking back on my own experience. [I was] educated in the North. I had one peer at secondary school that came from [border county in Ireland], and she came because her Mum was a Principal in the local school. So, from she was four she was in the northern education system. So, in all my years, that was one and then I think of my sons and they talk about one if not two children, South of the border [who] came to the school in the North. And that was it. So, the fluidity in my experience is not there. It's actually not even accessible. I think one young boy [from the North], perhaps school and him were not getting on and his Mum said to me she was moving him... going to [school in Ireland] was an option, but he then had to technically go back a year. And for him, he found that hard.

A teacher commented on the presence of relatives in the other jurisdiction to leave children to school, collect them afterwards

and provide childcare after school, all of which facilitates the parents' working arrangements. As we have seen many families straddle the border as relatives build houses just on the other side of the border or move there for employment.

...we've still very much a lot of families would have the grannies and the grandas [on the other side of the border] who say "I could collect them if you drop them off here". There's still that strong family connection at primary but once they go, secondary, you know, the grandparents are getting older and children are independent and you know, all of those things come into play, as well as who lives where, you know... I would say a lot of the ones who have gone and are going North, one of their parents would have a northern [relative]... or would have gone to that school.

A parent living close to the border in Northern Ireland reflected on the different ages of transition between primary and post-primary school in the two jurisdictions

[the lady, resident in the South] who babysits for me is now a parent... her eldest is transferred... they would like to have held their son at national school for one more year because that was the dad's experience. They felt maybe the extra year of nurturing he would have got at Primary School, he would have benefited, but it was not an option for him and that's they live half a mile up the road from me. He's finished his first year [in a northern post-primary school], and his dad just said, "I think it's awful". I suppose when you come from a wee rural school, you're with your peers, you're just maybe not as exposed as you would be in the big town and in secondary school, with children 16 and 17 year olds, and they were a bit frustrated

by that. So, I'm surprised that actually [with] some parents there is movement there but in my experience, there's no movement

One parent cited a familiarity with the educational system on the other jurisdiction as making it easier for her to make use of it.

I went to school in the North so you know I have that kind of head start and just knowing the northern system

Some border residents seem not even to consider moving their children into a different jurisdiction, even when the location of schools suggests that might be advantageous.

It was a school at the bottom of my road, turn left 500 yards... a northern school, and it's closed because numbers dwindled, and the kids went to school four miles over a country road [further] into the North... even though there's a school south of the border just two miles up the road. That wasn't even a feature... that didn't even enter the conversation

There was only one instance recounted of movement on transfer after primary which appeared to be predicated by the learner's community affiliation. A teacher in a school in Ireland recollected

I was teaching here in [border county in Ireland] for nearly two years, there was one... actually there was two friends left in sixth class to go to a boarding school in [city in Northern Ireland]. And I was told they were Protestant children so they were going to a boarding school. I was like, "oh, I didn't know that was a big issue to talk about..."

2.1.7 Challenges for educational mobility

Respondents identified a range of reasons why more parents did not choose to send their children to schools over the border, even where the geography of school locations might have suggested that that was the most logical decision, including a lack of awareness of the options and their implications. There were also fears about whether any choices made might affect government benefits

...it was never a publicised option of going to Northern Ireland for your post- primary School. I know of a family that did do that. But they had to have a Northern Ireland address in order to facilitate that. And there's implications then for Child Benefit and all the rest of that.

The cost of education was also raised at many of the Community Conversations. A teacher who lived in and whose children attended schools in Ireland but who had experience of teaching in Northern Ireland suggested that

... what drove that [parents from Ireland having their children educated in Northern Ireland] was very much so was around costings that you weren't buying your textbooks. You weren't buying your stationery; you weren't buying every single thing that you needed... I am a teacher as well. And I suppose teaching in Northern Ireland, the thing of children coming in with no pens or pencils or rubbers, you had your cupboard and you just gave children whatever they needed. The cost of education is unbelievable. And I find every August you're going in and you're buying Pritt sticks, you're buying the crayons, you're buying scissors, I couldn't believe when my children started at National school that you were buying the scissors to send in... this is

crazy. You're buying the books. Nowadays, thankfully there's a book rental scheme, but I mean, you're still paying probably €200 for textbooks in fifth and sixth year in secondary school in [town close to the border in the South]. You're buying every textbook, every exercise book. Your scientific calculators... everything. So, I do get why the family went to the local post-primary school just across the border.

Another parent mirrored that sentiment

our experience would have been, you know, people coming from South of the border North. No one went North to South or as you are describing, why would you go and pay for it?

It may be notable that books in primary schools in Ireland are to be given free to primary school learners from 2023. Nonetheless, despite the Irish state's pledge to provide free education for all in the Constitution, it continues to be argued that Ireland has never had free primary or post-primary education¹⁸, with parents being asked for 'voluntary' contributions and service charges.

There are also bureaucratic hurdles to be navigated if you choose to send your child over the border for education. A respondent living in the South with children attending school over the border explained:

...there's a lot of people that just wouldn't step across the border because it is too complicated, it is footery [Ulster Scots word meaning 'awkward'], like it was the medical forms to fill in with [name of child] going into P7 in September, and I was going... "now... medical form... should we

change our doctor or will we stay [with our doctor in the] South?" You know, I ended up... I just left the medical forms... I thought it should be all right. Like, we can take the form to the doctor if she needs to go. At the minute we're all [registered with] doctors [in the] South

There were also other formalities required, as another parent from Ireland with her children enrolled in schools there related:

...when my children started in primary school in the South, on the registration form, they needed their PPS number [Personal Public Service number, a unique reference number allowing citizens to access social welfare and other benefits]. Now, I don't know why or what or what that's about but that would nearly exclude children from the North.

There was also a perception that other parents would make judgements about those who lived in one jurisdiction and attended school in another, suspecting that they had, in some way, 'cheated the system'. It should be noted that there is a reciprocal arrangement between the two jurisdictions allowing pupils to attend schools across the border with the only stipulation being that schools in Northern Ireland must only consider enrolling a child resident in Ireland, after all Northern Ireland children have been considered. However, this arrangement may not be widely known by parents, and earlier research in this project demonstrated that even some principals were unsure of the arrangements for cross-border movement of pupils. Nonetheless, the prospect of being judged to have done something contrary to the rules seems to have some traction. One parent speculated about

18 O'Brien, C. (2023) Parents on 'voluntary contributions' and charges: 'If you don't pay, there's no locker or school journal'. *Irish Times* 12th August 2023 <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/education/2023/08/12/parents-on-so-called-voluntary-contributions-if-you-dont-pay-theres-no-locker-or-school-journal/>

...children who come go across the border for secondary school. People talk and they say, "But didn't they fake documents to get their child into the northern school?" That's not nice. And that would be said to the children. So, if they do anything... any misdemeanour "Oh, what else would you expect? Didn't they fake the documents" and like, that's awful.

It is notable that no one in that particular Community Conversation challenged this interpretation.

Transport to school is also an issue for some parents. In Ireland, parents pay Bus Éireann for transport to school, unless the family have a Medical Card which is issued to families with low incomes relative to their family size, and few savings or other assets. In Northern Ireland, school transport is currently free to all if the primary school is more than 2 miles away from the learner's residence (or 3 miles for post-primary schools). This is provided by the local bus company, Ulsterbus, or using a fleet of Education Authority (EA) buses. In neither instance does school transport cross the border to facilitate cross-border learners. Indeed, one parent complained that their children had to walk a considerable distance after being dropped off:

...it won't even go to the border. In my [location near the border], the kids are dropped off a certain distance and they talk about the yellow bus [provided by EA] or the Ulsterbus. That is it. And you know, half a mile in a rural road, a busy road, is very different to half of mile in the urban area where there's a footpath and they're safe...

While free transport in Northern Ireland will be provided from the nearest pick-up point to the border, if a child was attending a school

in the North from a residence in the South, parents would be responsible for getting the child to that point.

Parents, particularly those living very close to the border but some distance from the nearest school in their own jurisdiction, often described travel as more convenient if a school across the border were attended. This is particularly true of post-primary education, as those schools are more likely to be located in urban areas, which may be more accessible across the border, depending on local geographies. One respondent found that the time that it would have taken to travel to post-primary school some distance away in Ireland would have been much greater as the child lived close to the border and not far from a post-primary school in Northern Ireland.

...the geographical reasoning [for the child crossing the border to go to post-primary school] was, we are on the last bus stop before you fall off the planet earth of Ireland, you know. We are the first bus stop in the morning [if the child was to attend a school in Ireland]. So [child's name] would get on the bus at a quarter past seven, drive round all the wee busy roads of the countryside [picking up other children]... and get in to school for say half eight... and the same coming back. Or, you could hop in a car and you take 10 minutes to do it and drove her to [name of town in Northern Ireland]. You're giving the child back 10 hours of their week.

Despite the reciprocal arrangement for education, schools in Northern Ireland have to fill their enrolment with children from that jurisdiction first, before they can consider children from the other side of the border. That may have fuelled the perceived need for a Northern Ireland address when applying for a school. As one Principal put it

although they don't require one, quite often if granny conveniently lives in the relevant jurisdiction, you'll get that address

This is a reference to a process commonly nicknamed 'grannyng', which is using the address of a relative in the other jurisdiction, rather than the home address, to secure a place in a school on that side of the border.

The issue of where a pupil's doctor is registered, whether in the North or the South, was also discussed in several of the Community Conversations. One of the concerns was that if, for example, autism was diagnosed in one place, then a change in the jurisdiction of schooling would mean that the learner would have to start the process of diagnosis again. One teacher explained

concerning diagnoses [such as of autism], if they have the entire package, and they come across the border in the North they [the educational authorities] go "Oh, thanks very much, but no thanks. Yes, we're starting again." I think they won't accept what's been done before, which can put you back three years...

Another teacher developed the point

if the child's presentations were become more evident, as they grew older, then it's back through the GP... and so if the child is medically registered south of the border... parents with children who maybe have moved from the UK [mainland] back to Northern Ireland, their support is not recognised... they have had to start again. And that's parents who perhaps are moving because they found the pressure on families... and then they moved back to Northern Ireland for family support, but actually they're put back three years

There is a centre for Autistic Children located at Middletown, on the border between Armagh and Monaghan. This centre provides training and other support for schools in both jurisdictions and is jointly funded by both Departments of Education. However, despite the joint funding, the way in which each Department require their money to be spent is different. For example, in Northern Ireland whole schools can be referred to the centre, which is considered important for capacity building, whereas, in Ireland, an approach based on individual referrals is preferred.

There are other issues, such as whether an autism diagnosis provided in one jurisdiction is accepted in the other.

...a private diagnosis? They can't even pay for it if they're living south of the border

Despite evidence of movement of learners across the border in some school communities, and no evidence in others, in all communities there appeared to be a general lack of knowledge about the process, whether it was permitted to access schools in the other jurisdiction, and whether any regulations had changed following Brexit. One parent commented

I don't know the specifics of it, but if you live in Southern Ireland, I'm not sure what the rules are now because as part of the EU if you were entitled to a free education in one part of the EU, you are entitled to it... so in effect if you were a student in [border county in Ireland], and you went to University in Belfast, you didn't have to pay the fees because you didn't have to pay the fees in the South. But because we're now in Brexit they didn't think how lucky they were...

Another Ireland-based parent lamented the lack of public dissemination around the possibilities of accessing cross-border educational opportunities.

...it's not publicised that... okay go and check out [post-primary school in Northern Ireland] go and check out [another post-primary school in Northern Ireland], go and check out [yet another post-primary school in Ireland]... it's very much [down to your initiative] and for me it was always the families that maybe had relations that were living in Northern [Ireland] that got to do that.

The barriers to mobility for teachers also attracted some attention in the Conversations.

even as a teacher to work in the South, for example... but qualified in the North... that was a huge climb. So, I was even wondering about the movement of teachers

Additionally, the differences in the systems also posed a potential barrier to the movement of teachers, and potentially learners.

There is support, but it's still hard. But then the teaching of Irish in the South is a whole different questions as well. So why would... some one person [said] to me so "why would they do that [move from North to South to teach]? You're going to take hassle from that so that's a different complication. And the movement. To me there is a there is a big glass wall there. Unless you need to go through that door to go South for education... no, you come out of the house and turn right

A parent captured some of the challenges of border communities as she summarised some of those difficulties.

In relation to movement and increased coming together of schools: is it still a bit controversial yet? [sounds of agreement]. Even looking at the border here, and the thing that springs to mind is, it's like a jigsaw puzzle and the piece on one side of the border, the education system, does not sit well with the other side of it. So what are we going to do? Take off the wee sticky-out bit, or are we going to make the inward bit of the jigsaw puzzle bigger to fit things in?

3.0 Conclusion

While the number of respondents in these Community Conversations was limited, this allowed a range of topics to be covered and maximised the opportunities for contributors to provide in-depth comments about living along the border and their experiences of education provision there, and to engage with others in deeper and more developed exchanges of ideas.

There was certainly evidence to support findings from other phases of the research, including that concerning movement of learners across the border. In the school type we were focusing on, primary schools, that movement seemed primarily to be learners resident in Ireland crossing the border to access primary schools in Northern Ireland, at least in the communities that we had visited, which tends to corroborate earlier parts of the research. Almost invariably, those parents who took advantage of the possibility of their child attending a school in the other jurisdiction were those who already had experience of that system, perhaps having attended school there themselves but having subsequently moved residence across the border. Many individuals in this phase of the research, and this was generally supported by findings in earlier phases of this research, appeared somewhat unclear about the reciprocal arrangements for cross-border movement of learners. There was even some evidence of this uncertainty in teaching staff. This is understandable to a degree, as most parents keep their children within their own jurisdiction and those who might consider crossing the border seem to be the exception. Additionally, decisions about school choice are made more complex because of the relatively wide range of school types in each jurisdiction, particularly in post-primary education in Northern Ireland. However, some parents who are unfamiliar with the

system of education across the border and the reciprocal arrangements for attending school there, might well have found it more convenient to access a school in the other jurisdiction because of place of residence or work/childcare arrangements but they tended not to have sufficient information to have that option available to them.

This phase of the research demonstrated a range of opinion in relation to closer alignment of schools across traditional social divisions. Some argued that any move towards greater alignment might exacerbate rather than reduce community division. Others expressed admiration for Educate Together schools and community choirs, for example, suggesting some openness to embrace cross-community solutions. However, it was often unclear what the dominant viewpoint was in any community, such were the variety of perspectives articulated.

There was limited evidence for sustained linkages between primary schools in the two areas visited in this phase, apart from some Shared Education in two schools in Northern Ireland. Indeed, there was evidence that any such links that had existed were under threat, given recent budget cuts. Links with other schools across the border seemed not to be a feature of the areas visited, despite the geography of some school locations potentially favouring such connections over intra-jurisdictional ones. Given the benefits of linkages between schools, especially in rural areas, this might be viewed as an opportunity missed. It may be that the areas chosen were not involved in CASE, for example (see section 2.1.4), or perhaps those schools involved in such initiatives had no parents or staff represented in the Community Conversations undertaken in this research. Nonetheless, stronger linkages between schools within a local area, regardless of

sector or jurisdiction, might be considered useful for school sustainability and would also bring wider educational benefits. The CASE model would seem to offer much to develop school linkages across school type and sector. It can be difficult to establish such collaborations and this may be compounded by a further division along the border.

There appeared to be no forum or any structure which allowed teachers to collaborate, and systemic collaboration more widely appeared to be patchy, at best. While Teacher Educators across the island of Ireland have a structure – SCoTENS – through which they can share good practice and exchange solutions to shared problems, there is no equivalent for teachers. While teachers lack such a cross-border facility, the clusters of small schools in Ireland through the Small Schools Project facilitate school collaboration, so important for teacher professional learning particularly for schools with small staff numbers. While there are currently no clusters operating on a cross-border basis, such structures in the fledgling Small Schools Project might provide an avenue for useful collaboration, where natural clusters of schools occur. In any case, opportunities for teachers from both sides of the border to come together to share good practice and to develop pedagogies, school leadership approaches and other vital aspects of delivering for children in rural primary schools would benefit educational provision on both sides of the border.

A number of challenges to cross-border mobility were noted. Some are related to a lack of information, already noted, but others are related to differences in school structures, particularly the age of transfer. As learners in Northern Ireland transfer to post-primary schools at age 11 and in Ireland at age 12, this complicates matters for transferring from a northern to a southern school, or vice versa, at that stage.

The sum of these Community Conversations was to demonstrate the strength of these communities in terms of social cohesion and mutual support – this was also clear in the affection for their local schools. The local primary school is very much at the heart of each of these communities, and the micro-communities within them, each centred around their local school and any other social amenities which still exist. However, this hints at the vulnerability of such communities as well. As one community representative put it *‘if there was like closure or something, I think the community breaks’*. There is a need for an even greater understanding of these communities and the importance to them of retaining their local school. Whatever form any rationalisation of border primary school provision takes, the key role played by the local primary schools must be recognised.

Overall Conclusions and Recommendations

September 2023

Overall conclusions

This research suggests that communities along the border on the island of Ireland have challenges which are quite distinctive and, for rural border communities, these seem to compound the challenges experienced by rural populations elsewhere. These challenges were perhaps greatest during ‘the Troubles’, when the population living close to the border experienced considerable violence, in some cases more extreme than that faced in urban areas. ‘The Troubles’ also prompted a hardening of the border, with many crossing points closed. Those that remained open were heavily militarised, and this too restricted social and economic activity. Some of the social divisions which deepened at that time still resonate in some border communities. While this seems less apparent in the younger population, other challenges such as Brexit and the uncertainty around the future of the border continue to impact on people who live in these communities. The greatest impacts may be on those who make use of the opportunities that living near the border promises: to shop, to work or to socialise on either side of the border, irrespective of place of residence. Another aspect especially important for young families is the possibility of choosing educational facilities on the side of the border on which they reside or instead accessing the provision on the other side of the border.

That choice is not always straightforward. Much educational policy is different on each side of the border. The disparities in planning approaches to small schools, North and South, are very apparent. Leaders of small schools in Northern Ireland, and their governors and many parents, are acutely aware of Area Planning decisions regarding the school estate across the province. In this research, some felt that Area Planning should more fully recognise the vital need to retain schools in

border communities because of their economic and social vulnerability. The challenges of reaching enrolment levels of 105 in many communities, one of the sustainable school criteria in Northern Ireland, are considerable. While there is some recognition that the enrolment threshold is just one of a series of measures of a school’s sustainability, as one of the few measurable criteria it holds a particular significance. Schools are well aware of the impact that any hint of unsustainability might have on their future viability and the uncertainty for those schools who are close to or below this threshold is challenging for all those involved with schools. On the other hand, small schools in Ireland seem more secure, at least at present, and proposed initiatives to rationalise their numbers appear to have been abandoned. Recent government initiatives in Ireland have rather been to support small schools and ameliorate any challenges they might experience. The result is a very different pattern of small schools with, as was shown in the Phase 1 report, an average enrolment in border schools in Ireland of 135, compared to 217 in Northern Ireland. Additionally, 6% of all schools in the border region of Ireland were very small, with enrolments of 25 or less; no schools of that size remain in Northern Ireland. One unexpected outcome of this disparity is that the mismatch of school size on each side of the border can make the establishment of school collaborations more difficult.

It was clear across all phases of the research that there was a dearth of information for parents in terms of accessing and navigating cross-border educational opportunities at primary level. Those parents who had experience of education in another jurisdiction – they may have worked in schools there, or attended schools there as children – appeared to be much more likely to avail of opportunities to send their children there.

There were instances where those parents also appeared to be the main source of information to other parents who did not have a similar background. For many parents, it was clear that they valued their local school and wanted their children to attend that, which largely meant staying within the same jurisdiction. For others, the most convenient school may lie across the border. Decisions of convenience also extended to childcare arrangements and, with extended family often located on the other side of the border, that might encourage more cross-border movement of learners. However, for many parents that was not an option available because of a lack of knowledge that this might be possible, dependent upon the availability of places in the intended school. Even when the parent knew that it was possible, navigating the process to apply for such a place was not considered straightforward.

Many respondents noted some challenges in terms of disparities in school structures making transfer more challenging. This is particularly so in the case of someone considering changing schools across the border when transferring from primary to post-primary level, as the age of transfer is different in each jurisdiction. If moving from south to north, which was the dominant movement observed during this research, this would involve a choice of either:

- removing your child at age 11, a year before primary education in Ireland is complete, to move to a post-primary school in Northern Ireland, or
- keeping your child in primary education in Ireland and transferring her/him at age 12, a year older than the year group in Northern Ireland into which they would move.

Principals in Ireland emphasised the lack of preparation in those children transferring at age 11, and the importance of that final year in primary. The differences in curriculum were also noted, particularly in the teaching of Irish. However, from the responses provided, this appeared to be a less significant barrier to movement.

The research highlighted a lack of opportunities for teachers working in either side of the border to pursue joint Professional Learning. The limited opportunities for professional dialogue in small schools is well attested in the literature, as far back as the 1967 Plowden Report¹, and is often one of the arguments advanced for favouring larger schools. It could equally be argued that teachers might have much to learn from colleagues across the border and, in many cases, the geography of these schools makes it more convenient to have collaboration across borders rather than restricting them within a single jurisdiction. There is also much which could be learned, from classroom level up to system-wide level, from observing and comparing approaches, strategies and policies.

The degree to which schools were collaborating was less than had been expected by the research team. Small schools offer considerable benefits in terms of their size, providing a 'family' atmosphere and a very personal educational experience. However, the disadvantage of such schools is that the pupils may encounter limited social mixing and have a reduced exposure to social diversity². This might make school collaborations even more important for schools with a small intake. Much of the lack of collaboration observed was reported to be a consequence of COVID and it is clear that

¹ Central Advisory Council for Education. (1967) Children and Their Primary Schools. *The Plowden Report* (London, HMSO).

² Smith, D. and DeYoung, A. (1988) Big school vs. small school: conceptual, empirical, and political perspectives on the re-emerging debate, *Journal of Rural & Small Schools*, 2, 2.

many schools are only now, and very slowly, beginning to consider re-establishing links which had previously been long-standing.

Often these links are heavily dependent on personal connections built up over many years, and personnel change in schools during and after the pandemic may undermine any regeneration of school collaborations. There also seems to be residual reluctance to organise events which bring large numbers of people together, and the fear of COVID infections seems still to be a factor, albeit implied rather than explicit, in some of those decisions. The factor most widely articulated as inhibiting school collaborations, however, was cuts to education funding. Some schools could not afford to restore the collaborative initiatives without that funding, despite a recognition of the value of such contact for the children. Others, often more advantageously located in relation to one another, appeared determined to reinstate their collaborations. However, in those cases, they did emphasise that, without funding, the extent of the collaboration, and its effectiveness for learners, would be diminished.

The research indicated that social divisions along community lines are still strong, particularly in Northern Ireland. We have noted that many of these border areas were particularly affected by 'the Troubles' and suspicion appears to be not far from the surface in some communities. While we did encounter evidence of change, particularly in younger people with no personal experience or memory of the conflict, these Northern Ireland communities are still relatively polarised. In Ireland, there were still divisions, but these appeared not to be as deep or impactful on community relations. Thus, particularly in Northern Ireland, mixed views were expressed within communities

as to how to address any challenges to education provision in the future. There were those who argued strongly that community-specific schooling must remain, and to move to any alternative provision could risk the community cohesion which exists in these border areas. Others argued for change, and some proposed solutions which would better guarantee continued educational provision in an area, encompassing both communities. It was difficult to decipher what the majority voice of the communities was in these instances. There are different viewpoints, all of which are valid and often held tenaciously, but there is little apparent agreement on what should or could be done to protect education provision in these communities. It is worth emphasising that educational provision in these communities is often the factor which sustains them, keeping young families in the area and attracting others to move there.

While this research encountered few examples of school collaborations, we are aware of promising educational initiatives including the *Small Schools Project* and *Collaboration and Sharing in Education (CASE)*, discussed in Section 2.1.4 in the Phase 3 report, which are impacting positively on border communities. Both initiatives appear to offer opportunities for border schools to engage in professional dialogue, helping to overcome the disadvantages of being a small school while continuing to enjoy its advantages.

Visual minutes, on the next page, show the key themes which emerged from all of the community engagement along the border throughout this one-year project and which have shaped the recommendations which follow.



Recommendations

Considering the research findings from all the phases of this research, recommendations can be made at a number of levels.

LEARNERS

The benefits of schools collaborating are clear, and perhaps these are even more necessary and valuable for schools with comparatively low enrolments. The potential strengths of school collaboration, as promoted in the Small Schools Project, should be expanded, including creating cross-border collaborations where such clusters naturally exist.

PARENTS

Parents in border communities often appear to be making decisions about the future of their children on the basis of incomplete knowledge. Emphasis should be placed on the creation and dissemination of short, accessible information sources jointly produced by each Department of Education clearly stating the possibilities of accessing cross-border education, including the restrictions placed on that and the potential benefits and pitfalls. This could take the form of a leaflet and/or dedicated webpages. It should include clear procedural guidelines providing parents with clear information about the practical steps that allow them to explore the possibilities of accessing cross-border education, in either direction.

TEACHERS

A more structured mechanism to allow teachers to collaborate across the border should be considered. This might be based on something like the SCoTENS model, which allows such collaboration for Initial Teacher

Education. Some impetus which supports a grassroots level collaboration might be considered, or a more formal structure supported at regional level. This might also operate through clusters as in the Small Schools Project noted above.

COMMUNITIES

While this research was able to allow communities to articulate their views, including their opinions in relation to primary school provision in their areas, it also highlighted the difficulty of accessing a community voice which is fully representative – some seem to want patronage change/transformation while others argue against. This may reflect a lack of opportunity for communities to discuss, debate and potentially agree on compromise decisions. There is a need for additional mechanisms that enables/facilitates ongoing, sustained community voices and builds on the project, focusing on sustainable education provision and the relationship between primary school provision and sustainable, resilient communities. A model based on Community Conversations³ might be developed, rolled out to those border communities who want to engage with such a discussion around future school provision in their communities. It should be emphasised that encouraging such discussion does not mean precipitating change, as the community could well come to the agreed decision that present arrangements are satisfactory. However, this would give local communities some agency in decisions about local educational provision.

3 https://www.ulster.ac.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0016/1201174/Bates-OConnor-Community-ConversationToolkit-2018.pdf

SYSTEM LEARNING

While the advantages to education generally, from professional dialogue among teachers has been noted, joint professional learning opportunities for wider educational stakeholders should be promoted and supported. Sharing best practice and enabling learning from the approaches taken by other systems has a lot of potential to developing systems on both sides of the border, and improving education systems in terms of approaches, strategies and policy. This could take the form of more regular conference- type meetings, and increased visits to other organisations to see how they operate in practice, as well as structures to allow that learning to be shared more effectively to others in each of the educational stakeholder organisations.

RESEARCH

It is recognised that this research has been relatively short-term and limited in geographic reach. Additionally, the sample size of respondents was relatively low. Although all residents along the border were given the opportunity to contribute to the online survey,

even the extensive survey promotion may not have reached everyone. Also, those residents who have limited technical skills or access to digital devices or connectivity will have been under-represented in such a survey. In terms of field visits, there were many communities along the border which were not represented. Nonetheless, the research shed light on an under-researched set of communities which are uniquely vulnerable, and the provision of primary education, in particular, appears key to their survival long-term. However, further rigorous research in border communities, especially in those communities where continued educational provision is or may become uncertain in the longer term, is essential. We would recommend that any further research builds upon this base-level research, and also extends into a consideration of pre-school and post-primary provision. Furthermore, a wider range of communities needs to be visited. Border communities have very specific challenges, and any further understanding of these, and the most effective responses to them, will help to ensure the survival of these communities, exposed as they are to political and economic forces outside their control.

Google Jamboard display of responses at the online public event, 25 September 2023

How could recommendations be implemented?

Very interesting research - important to understand these communities

Thank you all! Wonderful piece of informative and accessible research.

Thanks very much for this folks, very valuable and interesting research!

These communities have very particular challenges and it is important that they are supported.

Thank you, very interesting! I think ideas/thoughts around how to reach more of those community voices would be useful.

A simple step would be to provide clear information about people's rights to attend school across the border.

Working more with community partners that can provide local knowledge and experiences.

Further work with parents in the area to consider what they would like to press for.

Joint Teacher Professional Learning projects with schools across the border would be welcomed but currently are not supported.

Physical/virtual spaces to enable collaboration between teachers/info sessions on possibility for schooling across borders for parents seem to be imperative

Interesting comparisons and challenges for rural areas on both sides of the border - it would be interesting to delve more into the policy differences in terms of sustainability

Need for a government in NI to allow cross border links for Education to be explored - interesting work

School leaders in border communities face daily additional challenges, it has been acknowledged that they require support to do their job. Who provides this support?

It's not just schools that face challenges of sustainability near the border. Schools sometimes relied on, but links can be made through other institutions too.



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