ESRI
RESEARCH SERIES

Number 202, April 2025

AN INSTITIÚID UM THAIGHDE EACNAMAÍOCHTA AGUS SÓISIALTA
ESRI ECONOMIC & SOCIAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Sharing the Island: Economic and Social Challenges and Opportunities: Evidence from an ESRI Research Programme

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SHARING THE ISLAND: ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES: EVIDENCE FROM AN ESRI RESEARCH PROGRAMME

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RESEARCH SERIES

NUMBER 202

Available to download from www.esri.ie

https://doi.org/10.26504/rs202

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research forms part of a research partnership between the ESRI and the Shared Island Unit of the Department of the Taoiseach on 'The Economic and Social Opportunities from Increased Cooperation on the Shared Island'. The purpose of the programme is to produce research outputs which will add to understanding of current and potential linkages across the island of Ireland in a range of economic, social and environmental domains.

The authors would like to thank the Shared Island Unit of the Department of the Taoiseach and the members of the research programme steering committee for their input. Particular thanks to Katy Hayward for her comments and advice as external advisor, to ESRI reviewers for their comments and to Helen Russell who acted as editor. Special thanks to our ESRI colleagues past and present both for compiling these programme reports initially, and for checking this one.

FOREWORD

In 2020, the Shared Island Unit in the Department of the Taoiseach approached the ESRI about the possibility of creating a joint research programme to support the overall aims of the Shared Island initiative. Following discussions, it was agreed that a programme should be established with two broad goals.

First, recognising that the island of Ireland has two sets of public policy on economic, social and environmental issues, there was clearly scope to learn about the impact of different policies by comparing the outcomes across various domains in the two jurisdictions. In this way, the research programme would follow the types of comparative analyses that are typically conducted across the regions of the UK, the countries of Europe and the states of the US. Indeed, it was somewhat surprising that this research method had not been exploited more extensively on the island of Ireland previously.

The second broad goal of the programme was to explore the possibility of increased collaboration and linkage on the island of Ireland, including on public service delivery. By international standards, the populations of Ireland and Northern Ireland are small and so the scope to exploit economies of scale is limited. It seemed sensible to explore how this scope might be maximised by considering elements of public service delivery on an all-island basis where this could benefit citizens across the island. Other areas of increased linkage could also be explored such as trade in goods and services.

The ESRI was very pleased to work on the programme. Our mission is 'to provide evidence to inform policymaking and public debate'. Since our founding in 1960, the mission has been pursued primarily with regard to Ireland but, on occasions, our work programme included Northern Ireland. One example was the 1999 publication Ireland North and South: Perspectives from Social Science.[1] The ambition to undertake more research on all-island issues and on Northern Ireland was always present and was promoted within the ESRI by Board members such as Dr T.K. Whitaker and Sir George Quigley, both of whom were well-known for their support of all-island collaboration. Hence, the opportunity provided to us by the Shared Island initiative was heartily welcomed by the ESRI.

In the five years since 2020, my colleagues have produced a series of reports on a range of topics where the objectives of the programme – mutual learning and potential collaboration – have been pursued. We have held a large number of

1 Heath, A., Breen, R. and Whelan, C. (1999). *Ireland North and South: perspectives from social science*. Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy.

conferences and webinars to disseminate the work, including conferences in Belfast, jointly with Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University. As the findings of this body of work and implications for policy are presented in this report, I will not try to summarise those findings but instead will offer some broad observations.

Within the programme, the reports which have looked at economic outcomes across the island point to the relative success of Ireland in achieving higher levels of disposable income and living standards. This in turn has been linked in the research to factors such as the differing nature of foreign direct investment in Ireland and Northern Ireland and lower levels of human capital in Northern Ireland.

These findings could create a sense of disappointment about the rate of economic progress seen in Northern Ireland since 1998, but an alternative perspective is to focus on the economic potential which exists. For many years, Ireland's peripherality and lack of natural resources led to a belief that the economic performance would always lag behind Great Britain and the countries at the European core. However, Ireland has shown that with the right economic policies, it is possible for a small, peripheral state to achieve standards of living that are comparable to those of high productivity, high-income European states. There is no reason to believe that similar levels of income cannot be achieved in Northern Ireland and the results of the research conducted in this programme point to the needed investments.

While Ireland has achieved higher levels of income, it should also be noted that national output has shown greater volatility in Ireland compared to Northern Ireland over the last twenty years and poor policy in Ireland has contributed. It should also be noted that income inequality is similar across the two jurisdictions, although with different factors both increasing and reducing income inequality. As discussed in the report, this provides lessons for policy aimed at reducing income inequality.

On increased linkage and collaboration, healthcare is an area where the possible benefits seem potentially significant. The healthcare systems in both Ireland and Northern Ireland face challenges and reform proposals exist for both. Specialisation and collaboration in centres of excellence could lead to improvements in care for all on the island. Even if this is true, the pressures on those working in both systems probably makes it difficult to engage on strategic issues across the border. Hence, additional processes and institutions to foster and facilitate this type of cross-border cooperation may be needed.

Before closing, I want to thank Taoiseach Micheál Martin TD and the range of Government Ministers over the last number of years who have all shown significant interest in and support for the research programme and engaged with findings across a number of areas. I would also thank officials in the Department of an Taoiseach – in particular Aingeal O'Donoghue, Émer Deane and Eoghan Duffy - for the Departmental support for this joint research initiative and for engaging with the research outputs in such a constructive manner. I also want to thank Anne Barrington for chairing the programme's Steering Committee, and Karen Bonner of Ulster University for her membership of that Committee. Adele Bergin and Fran McGinnity represented the ESRI on the Steering Committee and I want to say a word of thanks to them also.

Finally, I want to thank my colleagues for their work under the programme. An impressive body of knowledge has been generated through which we now know a lot more about Ireland, Northern Ireland and all-island linkages.

Alan Barrett, ESRI Director

February 2025

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AHC	After housing costs
ARINS	Analysing and Research Ireland North and South
CAWT	Cooperation and Working Together
CSO	Central Statistics Office
CTA	Common Travel Area
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
ETA	Electronic Travel Authorisation
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FET	Further Education and Training
GFA	Good Friday Agreement
HEI	Higher Education Institution
MASN	Maximum Aggregate Student Number
NEET	Not in employment, education or training
NISRA	Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
NSMC	North South Ministerial Council
NWTEC	North West Tertiary Education Cluster
PPP	Purchasing power parity
PTSD	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
SCoTENs	Standing Conference on Teacher Education, North and South
SEM	Single electricity (wholesale) market
SEUPB	Special EU Programmes Body
SILC	Survey of Income and Living Conditions

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ireland and Northern Ireland share many social, historical and geographical characteristics but their political institutions and the configuration of policy are very different. This report summarises some key findings from the extensive and ambitious research programme between the ESRI and the Shared Island Unit (SIU) of the Department of the Taoiseach over the past four years, with 15 research reports published in total. The focus of the joint research programme has been broadly to investigate the economic and social challenges and opportunities that sharing the island presents. The purpose of this overview report is to synthesise some key findings from the programme reports and bring out interlinkages between them, as well as to highlight and reflect on implications for policy learning for the island in the future.

KEY FINDINGS

The main findings on the demographic and economic context presented in Chapter 2 include:

- Ireland has a younger age structure than Northern Ireland, with a higher percentage of the population in the 15 to 64 age bracket – a broad measure of the population of working age. Both labour force participation and employment rates are higher in Ireland than in Northern Ireland, and they have also increased faster in recent years.
- Household disposable income, a reliable measure of living standards that is not distorted by globalisation effects, was 18.3 per cent higher in Ireland than in Northern Ireland in 2018 and this gap has widened over time.
- The most recent data show that across all age groups, education participation rates are higher in Ireland than in Northern Ireland, and the gaps have increased over time for all age groups except the very youngest (aged 3 to 5 years).
- In 2022, Census data show 20 per cent of the population was born outside the jurisdiction of Ireland. This compares to 8.6 per cent in Northern Ireland born outside the UK in 2021.
- Life expectancy is an overarching measure that captures overall differences in general welfare and living standards. The most recent data show that life expectancy at birth for males and females in Ireland exceeded that of Northern Ireland by two years.

Chapter 3 reflects on inequalities in outcomes across the life course evidenced by programme reports. Some key findings are that:

- Women with children were less likely to be in paid employment than men in both Ireland and Northern Ireland. The nature of participation also differs between men and women, with higher rates of part-time work and of low pay among women in both jurisdictions. Participation in the labour market drops among those over 50 in both jurisdictions, particularly in Northern Ireland. This is partly due to disability-related inactivity, linked to higher chronic health problems among this cohort in Northern Ireland.
- Using 2019 income data, market income inequality (that is before taxes and benefits) is lower in Northern Ireland. The Irish tax system is more progressive in terms of redistributing income than in Northern Ireland. However, the level and coverage of means-tested benefits in Northern Ireland is higher, and this serves to reduce inequality more than in Ireland. The result is that inequality in disposable income (after tax and transfers) is very similar.
- Since 2009, child income poverty rates have been higher in Northern Ireland than Ireland, and the gap is widening as child poverty rates rise in Northern Ireland and fall in Ireland. By contrast, using a scale that measures the enforced lack of five essential key items of household expenditure, levels of child material deprivation have been somewhat higher in Ireland since 2010. Families in Ireland struggle more to translate their income into an adequate standard of living than in Northern Ireland, due to the higher cost of living.
- While the supply of GPs and utilisation of many primary healthcare services is similar, there are higher levels of unmet needs due to costs in Ireland. The most common reason for unmet need in both jurisdictions is long waits to access care. Overall, the evidence suggests that neither system performs consistently better than the other.
- Housing costs have increased, though comparable across both jurisdictions relative to incomes, with housing costs representing around 20 per cent of disposable income in both Ireland and Northern Ireland. The housing markets of different UK regions and Ireland can be characterised as having a boom and bust cycle, with the cycle being more extreme in Ireland.
- People's satisfaction with the political system, trust in political, judicial and media institutions, and the feeling that their voice counts in politics, were generally higher in Ireland compared to Northern Ireland. Yet there was considerable volatility in attitudes over the period in both jurisdictions, particularly in Ireland. While generational differences are not as marked as change over time, there is some evidence from the data that the youngest generations on the island of Ireland are becoming more disillusioned with their societies than older cohorts, particularly in Northern Ireland.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Literacy and numeracy skill levels at primary and secondary level are broadly similar in Ireland and Northern Ireland. However there are striking differences

in how these skills are reflected in qualifications. Much higher rates of early school leaving in Northern Ireland have consequences for access to, and the quality of, employment as well as productivity levels. There are differences too in take-up of post-secondary qualifications, showing the potential to develop further education and training in Northern Ireland as a route to employment.

- Educational inequality throughout the education system is apparent in both jurisdictions but is most evident in qualification levels in Northern Ireland and upper secondary grades in Ireland. This is an important policy issue given the consequences of poor educational attainment for adult life chances, including employment and health. There is potential for mutual policy learning around the targeting of local areas or schools as a basis for addressing educational disadvantage.
- Both systems face challenges around waiting lists for healthcare and adequacy of housing supply, highlighting the need for workforce development in both sectors.
- Challenges are similar too in the gendered nature of care and its impact on access to employment, with a need for (continued) expansion of affordable early years and after-school care in both jurisdictions. Lone mothers face particular challenges in accessing high-quality employment in both Ireland and Northern Ireland, suggesting the need for appropriate education and training supports as well as childcare.

CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION

The 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA) established an important framework for the formal operationalisation of cross-border cooperation on the island of Ireland with the establishment of six North-South bodies that operate under the policy direction of the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC). A further six broad policy areas were earmarked for cross-border cooperation under the agreement, with common policy approaches to be agreed in the NSMC and implemented separately in each jurisdiction. Despite some well recognised success in the area of cross-border tourism, it is reasonable to conclude that progress on cross-border cooperation has so far failed to meet its full potential since the signing of the GFA. There is a consensus among stakeholders that levels of cross-border cooperation have failed to meet expectations in many of the policy areas designated as being strategically important such as education, health, agriculture and the environment.

There are clear advantages to substantially upscaling North-South cooperation in existing strategic areas such as education, health and environmental policy and in extending the remit of cooperation to include new strategic areas for cooperation such as, for example, skills provision, foreign direct investment, labour market access and energy security. The areas identified as being strategically important for

cross-border cooperation should, ideally, be reviewed periodically to allow for changing priorities and, preferably, have dedicated budgets and oversight systems.

CONCLUSIONS

The research programme findings point to important commonalities and differences between Ireland and Northern Ireland, not only at one point in time but in trends over time. Thus, while income inequality levels are similar, other economic indicators relating to living standards and productivity generally favour Ireland, and the findings also show growing divergence in these key indicators in recent years.

A key element of the research programme has been to acknowledge the limitations of the comparable evidence used, and note what additional evidence or actions would be required to advance research in a particular policy area. Some of these include: cooperation between the CSO and NISRA, and larger samples in Northern Irish data. Linking survey data with administrative data could also harness the potential of existing evidence for comparison.

Programme research to date has documented important commonalities and differences in outcomes between Northern Ireland and Ireland as a basis for public understanding, policy learning and cooperation, but has also highlighted persisting barriers to this endeavour. The challenge for the future, both for research and for practical cooperation, will be to go beyond largely descriptive accounts to uncover and identify ways to address the processes underlying these different outcomes and the impacts they have on economic and social development and societal wellbeing.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Ireland and Northern Ireland share many social, historical and geographical characteristics but their political institutions and the configuration of policy are very different. These similarities and differences make a compelling case for comparing the two jurisdictions, and the interaction between the two. Recent years have seen increasing research interest in the topic, though the last comprehensive comparison was in the 1990s (Heath et al., 1999). This gap in research is beginning to be addressed including through the extensive and ambitious research programme between the ESRI and the Shared Island Unit (SIU) of the Department of the Taoiseach over the past four years, with 15 research reports published in total.

The research is set against a backdrop of recent substantial challenges: the exit of the UK from the EU and implications for Northern Ireland and North-South relations and cooperation; the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdown; rapid inflation and cost-of living challenges; capacity pressures on healthcare systems and housing markets in both Ireland and Northern Ireland. All of these factors influence the economic, social and political context in which these reports were written. The analysis in the programme is all based on the period after the Good Friday Agreement (1998). Yet the legacy of 25 years of violent conflict on the economy and society in Northern Ireland, a conflict from which Ireland was largely spared, is important to bear in mind (Coulter et al., 2021; NESC, 2022).

The focus of the joint research programme to date has been broadly to investigate the economic and social challenges and opportunities that sharing the island presents. Some of the reports compare themes across the island, others the interlinkages between jurisdictions. The research and policy scope is broad, with some topics focusing more on the economy – such as cross-border trade, foreign direct investment and productivity – and others on the provision of core services such as housing, primary healthcare and energy generation. Other reports focus on micro-level issues: one set of papers focuses on skills acquisition across the life course including education and training, student mobility, early childhood care and learning, while a second set considers aspects of equality in the two jurisdictions – gender equality, income inequality, child poverty, migrant integration, and social and political attitudes.

The purpose of this report is to synthesise some key findings from the programme reports and bring out interlinkages between them. It also seeks to highlight and

reflect on implications for policy learning for the island as a whole in the future. The report is by nature selective given the breadth of research conducted.

As a research programme between the ESRI and the Shared Island Unit, the topics for enquiry were not pre-defined. Rather they were developed on an ongoing and iterative basis, responding to key interests and challenges for both jurisdictions and knowledge gaps arising, including knowledge gaps identified in previous reports and during stakeholder consultations. Topics developed were also based on the ESRI researchers' expertise and the data available. Reports use the most appropriate methods in the relevant field of enquiry, drawing on international best practice, and these vary considerably across topics in the programme. For example, the report investigating income inequality in the two jurisdictions uses sophisticated microsimulation models, as is typical in research investigating the impact of tax and welfare systems – effectively a 'policy swap' (Doorley et al., 2024). The report comparing productivity across the island included simulation analysis to illustrate how productivity levels might vary for changes in the level of endowments of key productivity-related factors such as human capital (Bergin and McGuinness, 2022). In their analysis of enhancing the attractiveness of the island to high-value Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), Siedschlag et al. (2021) examined a range of counterfactual outcomes associated with policy choices and potential policy coordination for enhancing the attractiveness to FDI in high-value sectors. Many studies explored policy areas that had been well documented to date on a single jurisdiction basis but had never been comprehensively compared and analysed across both Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Many research projects captured an often-rapidly changing policy landscape. For this reason, five reports in the programme undertook consultations. In most of these, preliminary findings were presented to policy stakeholders and feedback received on policy priorities and direction of travel (Smyth et al., 2022; Curristan et al., 2023; Smyth and Darmody, 2023; Hingre et al., 2024; Russell et al., 2025). In one report, the consultation specifically addressed an issue not amenable to statistical data analysis – cross-border travel for migrants (McGinnity et al., 2023). Interviews with stakeholders in both jurisdictions also provided an important evidence base for the studies on education (which covered all levels from early years through to further and higher education). Primarily these interviews complemented the findings of quantitative work, giving an on-the-ground perspective and insights into policy.

The programme placed a premium on high-quality representative data with harmonised measures, to ensure that differences between jurisdictions are not due to either skewed, biased samples, or measurement differences, both of which could distort comparisons. A challenge throughout the programme has been availability of evidence for comparison. These evidence constraints influence both

choice of topics (what can be researched) and the method of analysis. Even in well-established survey exercises which use consistent, international measures, Northern Ireland, as a region of the UK, is often not specified in UK-wide datasets or included in statistically sufficient numbers; this means it is often integrated within overall UK analyses, which makes comparison with Ireland and even with other parts of the UK difficult. As Lawless (2021) pointed out when analysing cross-border trade in services, data limitations and challenges mean less of a focus on services than trade in goods. Accordingly, an important by-product of the programme has been to identify evidence gaps and build up a knowledge base to enable rigorous comparison. A key element of the research programme has been to acknowledge the limitations of the comparable evidence used and note what additional evidence or actions would be required to advance research in a particular policy area. Only in identifying evidence gaps can they potentially be filled. We return to this point in Chapter 6.

As well as what is feasible given the availability of data or potential to collect new data, topics were selected to reflect research gaps and not duplicate existing or ongoing research. For example, the evolution of political identities has been extensively researched already (Todd, 2021; Hayward and Rosher, 2023), so the consideration of social and political attitudes does not cover these, focusing instead on trust in institutions, social trust and belief in the effectiveness of politics (Laurence et al., 2023b). As a synthesis report, the primary focus here is on reports published as part of the research programme, but other complementary research is cited where it is particularly relevant or useful to the topics examined (National Economic and Social Council (NESC), 2022; Department of Finance, 2024; the Analysing and Research Ireland North and South (ARINS) research initiative;[2] Hayward et al., 2022).[3]

The purpose of this overview report is to synthesise some key findings from the programme as a whole and its contribution to knowledge. In summarising the reports, it will draw overall conclusions on the economic and social configuration of the island of Ireland today and reflect on implications for policy learning in both jurisdictions. Chapter 2 considers the *policy context* in broad terms and presents key demographic statistics. It also reviews differences in income and living standards.

Chapter 3 synthesises programme findings to assess *inequality in outcomes* across the life course in Ireland and Northern Ireland and how these are influenced by policy configurations. Beginning at the early years, through primary, post-primary and post-school/third-level education, it then considers differences among the

2 https://www.ria.ie/research-programmes/arins/read-arins-research/.
3 https://www.nesc.ie/publications/shared-island-shared-opportunity-nesc-comprehensive-report/.

working-age population in: productivity, gender and labour market inclusion; migrant integration; the cost of living; personal taxation and how the state redistributes income. Housing supply is also considered relevant for all age groups as is primary healthcare, even more relevant for older age groups. Differences in social and political attitudes across measures of people's trust in institutions, in their peers and their government are considered, and how these can be influenced both by the broader policy and economic context and by people's socio-economic positions.

Chapter 4 reflects on *overarching policy considerations* for both jurisdictions as identified through the research programme including the importance of increasing education and skills in Northern Ireland, to facilitate greater employment participation, higher productivity and earnings, and to increase Northern Ireland's attractiveness to investment to facilitate economic growth. It also highlights workforce development, including in construction, early care and education, and healthcare in both jurisdictions.

Chapter 5 maps the existing *cross-border connections and cooperation* in the areas considered through the research programme. It also explores how more strategic cooperation, investment and planning could help to achieve shared economic and social goals and address common policy challenges for both jurisdictions. These include the operation and effectiveness of cross-border institutions; cross-border cooperation in health; facilitating student mobility and deeper cooperation on education and skills development; and potential for further cooperation on tourism, energy generation and renewable energy.

Chapter 6 summarises the findings, and reflects on themes and issues not addressed by this programme to date, how any such gaps impact on the comparisons that can be drawn, and how future research could help address remaining gaps in our knowledge. It reflects on future prospects for the island as a whole for the years to come.

CHAPTER 2

Economic performance and living standards

2.1 POLICY CONTEXT

Public policy in Ireland, North and South, spans numerous areas (e.g. health, housing, education) and shares the overarching goal of improving the welfare of the population. Both jurisdictions have political and administrative structures that respectively shape the direction and delivery of policy. Both jurisdictions also face constraints in developing and implementing policies. Some of these constraints are common to both, and to other countries, such as having the necessary resources and the data infrastructure to assess need and evaluate policy. However, Northern Ireland faces additional significant constraints, particularly in terms of the experience of instability of the devolved political institutions and the limited fiscal autonomy that can impact scope for policy development and effectiveness.

In Northern Ireland, fiscal spending is primarily funded through the UK Government's block grant, supplemented by local taxes and other revenues.[4] Changes to the block grant are generally determined by the Barnett formula.[5] This fiscal mechanism adjusts the financing in proportion to spending changes in the rest of the United Kingdom, accounting for Northern Ireland's population share. Northern Ireland has benefited considerably from the grant over decades, though at the same time the Executive has limited power to borrow money. While the Northern Ireland Assembly has devolved powers for many economic and social areas,[6] its limited revenue raising powers limits fiscal autonomy.[7,8]

The nature of the multi-party power-sharing government system and the requirement for cooperation in key areas of policy-making, while in principle is designed to ensure balance and inclusivity, can lead to political deadlock. Executive ministers are appointed by the D'Hondt process in proportion to the parties' strength in the Assembly.[9] This process whereby individual parties with often competing objectives have responsibility for at least one of eight[10] devolved policy

4 Around 90 per cent of Northern Ireland Executive-led spending is financed by the block grant (Fiscal Commission Northern Ireland, 2022).

5 For a summary of the formula and debate around it, see: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7386/.

6 https://www.gov.uk/guidance/devolution-settlement-northern-ireland.

7 See Fiscal Commission Northern Ireland (2022) for more details.

8 The devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales also receive grants from the UK Government that fund most of their spending (see Keep, 2024 for more details). Each of the devolved administrations can also borrow certain amounts, that is mostly to fund capital investments.

9 https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/news-and-media/assembly-explained/understanding-the-dhondt-method-its-use-in-the-northern-ireland-assembly/.

10 In addition to the Executive Office, there are ministries in the areas of (1) Justice (2) Economy (3) Education (4) Finance (5) Health (6) Communities (7) Infrastructure, and (8) Agriculture, Environment and Rural affairs.

areas means that it can be relatively more difficult to agree on a well-integrated, coherent programme for government. More fundamentally, the fact that the Executive and Assembly have repeatedly collapsed since their formation is a challenge for policy-making. As Coulter et al. (2021) note:

> *In August 2018, Northern Ireland attained the unenviable status of being the democratic polity that has gone the longest period in peace time without a serving government* (ibid., p50).

This was before subsequent suspensions. When the devolved government is not in place, Ministers can continue in office in caretaker roles for defined periods and the UK Parliament retains the power to legislate for Northern Ireland. However, for the vast majority of policy areas, not having ministers in place during Assembly suspensions meant policy decisions and legislation were not being made. This limited fiscal autonomy and political instability can result in delays in policy implementation and can also limit the scale and scope of what can be achieved.

Furthermore, policy in many areas in Northern Ireland is substantially shaped by the UK Government. For example, the parity principle means that the social welfare system is broadly aligned with the wider UK. If Northern Ireland deviates from the rest of the UK in terms of welfare policies, it has to cover the extra cost from its devolved budget. For instance, the Northern Ireland Executive was able to introduce a scheme to mitigate the effects of the under-occupancy penalty ('the bedroom tax'). In addition, the welfare reform mitigation package put in place by the Northern Ireland Executive currently offsets the UK benefit cap for most families (Russell et al., 2025). In overall terms, however, the Executive has limited fiscal space to diverge significantly from wider UK welfare policy.

There are also instances where policies introduced in other parts of the UK have not been adopted in Northern Ireland. England introduced 30 hours free early childhood care and education in 2017, and Scotland and Wales followed soon after; in Northern Ireland children are entitled to 12.5 hours of early care and education per week (Stewart and Reader, 2020). Childcare policy stakeholders in Northern Ireland attributed the lack of policy development in the area over the previous decade to the uncertain and unstable political situation and expressed frustration at the slow pace of change (Curristan et al., 2022).[11] However, more recently, additional funding has been allocated to pre-school provision by the new Executive[12] with a commitment to standardise pre-school hours. Gender pay policy and pay reporting have also seen delays in Northern Ireland. Since 2017, pay gap

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11 'Nothing has moved forward because we don't have a functioning executive at the minute to sign off on any funding' (Childcare Stakeholder, NI, quoted in Curristan et al., 2023).

12 https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/education-minister-announces-ps25million-package-measures-early-learning-and-childcare-northern-ireland.

reporting has been mandatory for large employers in England, Scotland and Wales.[13] Section 19 of the Employment Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 provides for the making of gender pay gap reporting regulations by June 2017, but at the time of writing (late 2024) these have not yet been enforced.[14]

While previously both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland were part of the European Union, the withdrawal of the UK from the European Union has brought challenges in terms of reconciling regulations and standards between Northern Ireland and Ireland. One example of this is in the area of equality and human rights. In Article 2 of the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol (Windsor Framework), the UK Government committed to ensuring that the rights, safeguards and equality laws set out in the Good Friday Agreement would not be diminished as a consequence of Brexit. The UK Government has conferred new statutory powers and related resources on the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland to monitor the implementation of this article, known as the 'Dedicated Mechanism'.[15] This Dedicated Mechanism has highlighted divergence in the area of rights and equality law since its establishment, particularly in the area of gender equality policy (Craig et al., 2024), and also to EU equality funding.[16] More broadly, the common framework of EU law and policy previously facilitated North-South cooperation across all sectors significantly, and diverging legal and policy frameworks post-Brexit could well raise challenges or constraints.

In Ireland, policy-making is relatively centralised and fiscal policy plays an important role in managing the economy, and the budget process determines funding for various policy initiatives. While coalition governments are the norm, the formulation of Programmes for Government has typically been relatively more straightforward than in Northern Ireland.[17] The Government of Ireland has a spending rule to help guide policy and is also subject to EU fiscal rules. However, Ireland faces relatively less constraint under these rules as they are defined using

13 https://gender-pay-gap.service.gov.uk/.

14 See https://www.equalityni.org/GenderPayPolicy for further details. In principle the Good Jobs Bill in Northern Ireland could address this issue, though there is no indication of this to date. See https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/economy/good-jobs-consultation.PDF.

15 The UK Government has conferred new statutory powers and related resources on the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland to monitor the implementation of this article. See https://www.equalityni.org/brexit; https://www.ihrec.ie/documents/equality-and-rights-on-the-island-of-ireland-after-brexit/.

16 https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/DMU/DMU-WindsorFramework-AnnualReport2022-23.pdf.

17 That is not to say government formation in Ireland is uncomplicated; the multi-party and proportional representation electoral system generally entails coalition governments who have to agree on a programme for government. Coalition government formation typically takes several weeks to a few months in Ireland. There are cases where it extends beyond that, such as after the 2020 General Election it took over four months to form a government. In Northern Ireland, parties have 24 weeks to agree on a power-sharing executive. However, there have been cases of much longer timeframes, such as, after the 2017 election, where the executive was only restored in 2020.

GDP-based measures which overstate the underlying performance of the Irish economy.

As a very open economy, Ireland is more exposed to global economic shocks, with associated consequences for the labour market, welfare and society more broadly. The concentration of multinationals in certain sectors has intensified this risk, with the economy more exposed to sector-specific shocks. The global recession had a profound effect on key economic variables including employment and incomes in Ireland. Laurence et al. (2023b) also highlight the impact on social and political attitudes: satisfaction with democracy, political and media trust, trust in other people and optimism; all saw substantial declines with the onset of recession and subsequent austerity (see Section 3.5). Northern Ireland was less exposed to the Global Financial Crisis and the effects were not as marked relative to Ireland. Following the financial crisis, both Ireland and the UK implemented austerity policies with the aim of fiscal sustainability. In the case of Ireland this was part of the bailout agreement with the EU, IMF and ECB. While Ireland was more severely impacted by the banking crisis, it recovered faster than other countries, in large part because export demand in the sectors that the economy was concentrated in recovered relatively quickly (McQuinn and Varthalitis, 2020). While Ireland recovered faster than other countries, austerity policies impacted living standards and inequality (see Savage et al., 2015). UK austerity policies lasted for longer with consequential impacts on Northern Ireland. These policies involved significant tax rises, alongside cuts to public spending including education, health and social welfare. These policies had a significant impact on people's standard of living in Northern Ireland (Bergin and McGuinness, 2021).

2.2 SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

Population size and structure have important implications for many aspects of the economy. Changes in the demographic structure can have significant effects on the potential growth rate of the economy, mainly through their effect on labour supply and dependency ratios. Population ageing also has significant implications for many areas of government expenditure, especially in the areas of health and social welfare. Table 2.1 shows some key socio-demographic characteristics over time for Ireland and Northern Ireland, comparing 2010 with 2022. The population in Ireland is currently over 2.6 times that of Northern Ireland. Ireland has also experienced faster population growth than Northern Ireland, in large part driven by net inward migration (see Chapter 3 and McGinnity et al., 2023 for further discussion).[18] Overall, Ireland has a younger age structure than Northern Ireland, with a higher percentage of the population in the 15 to 64 age bracket – a broad measure of the population of working age. The dependency ratio, which relates the number of

[18] For example, over the period 2010 to 2020, net migration accounted for an average of 0.9 per cent of Northern Ireland's population while it accounted for an average of 0.15 per cent of the population in Ireland.

children (aged 0 to 14) and older persons (aged 65+) to the working-age population (aged 15 to 64) is lower in Ireland, indicating there are proportionally more adults of working age who can support the younger and older members of the population. While the increase in the overall dependency rate between 2010 and 2022 has been lower in Ireland than in Northern Ireland, this is driven by a larger increase in the old-age dependency rate being partially offset by a fall in the young-age dependency ratio. In terms of broad labour market aggregates, both participation and employment rates are higher in Ireland than in Northern Ireland, and they have also increased faster in recent years.[19] Stronger wage and overall economic growth in Ireland are likely to be key factors driving the gap in employment rates between Ireland and Northern Ireland (Smyth et al., 2022).

TABLE 2.1 SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OVER TIME

	Northern Ireland		Ireland	
	2010	2022	2010	2022
Population ('000)				
< 15	355	365	953	997
15-64	1,190	1,210	3,086	3,302
> 65	260	335	510	761
Total	1,805	1,911	4,549	5,060
Pop %				
< 15	19.7	19.1	21.0	19.7
15-64	65.9	63.3	67.8	65.3
> 65	14.4	17.6	11.2	15.0
Dependency Ratios				
< 15	29.8	30.2	30.9	30.2
> 65	21.8	27.7	16.5	23.1
Total	51.7	57.9	47.4	53.2
Employment Rate				
16-64	66.0	70.3	61.0	73.3
Participation Rate				
16-64	71.1	72.4	71.6	76.8

Sources: Population data come from the OECD. The labour market data come from the CSO and NISRA Labour Force Surveys.
Notes: Dependency rates are defined as those individuals between the ages of 0 and 14, and above the age of 65, relative to the total working-age population aged 15-64. Labour force participation rate is the ratio between the total labour force relative to the total working-age population. The working-age population refers to people aged 16 to 64. The employment rate refers to the percentage of people in the working-age population who are employed.

[19] Employment rates were higher in Northern Ireland in 2010 but the subsequent strong recovery from the financial crisis in Ireland led to a large increase in employment rates.

2.3 CAPTURING AND MEASURING LIVING STANDARDS: EVIDENCE TO DATE

As with many other aspects of life and society, up until recent years little was known about differences in income and living standards between Northern Ireland and Ireland, with the important exception of Heath et al. (1999).[20] However, in the past few years a number of studies have been published and the majority of these point towards income and living standards being higher in Ireland relative to Northern Ireland. Internationally, GDP per capita is the most commonly used measure for comparing living standards across countries. McGuinness and Bergin (2020) show that GDP per capita in Ireland's wealthiest region[21] was almost twice that of Northern Ireland and it was slightly above Northern Ireland in Ireland's poorest region.[22] However, McGuinness and Bergin (2020) also concede there are significant weaknesses with this metric, not least the distortionary impact of the FDI sector in Ireland, and argue that household disposable income represents a much more reliable measure of living standards. McGuinness and Bergin (2020) demonstrated that household disposable income in 2016, PPP (purchasing power parity) adjusted, was approximately $3,000 higher in Ireland compared to Northern Ireland, representing a gap in living standards of 12 per cent.[23]

In a later paper, Bergin and McGuinness (2021) compare GNI*[24] per capita for Ireland, which accounts for FDI-related distortions in the national accounts, with GDP per capita for Northern Ireland in 2018, and find that per capita incomes in Ireland were 51 per cent higher than in Northern Ireland. PPP-adjusted household disposable income in 2017 was again found to be approximately 12 per cent higher in Ireland compared to Northern Ireland. However, some studies have asserted that differences in living standards favour Northern Ireland. For example, FitzGerald and Morgenroth (2019) argue that living standards in Northern Ireland in 2012 were 20 per cent higher than in Ireland based on differences in public and private consumption per capita. Using updated data to calculate the same metric, FitzGerald and Morgenroth (2020) report that the gap in living standards in favour of Northern Ireland had fallen from 20 per cent to 4 per cent between 2012 and 2016. Bergin and McGuinness (2021), in a review of appropriate North and South living standards metrics, were critical of this consumption-based metric, arguing that such changes in the measure in a short time period raised questions with

20 See also outputs from the NERI institute: https://www.nerinstitute.net/research. See, for example, Wilson, 2020.

21 The Southern and Eastern region.

22 The Border, Midland and Western region.

23 Department of Finance (2024) examines gross disposable income per capita in Ireland and Northern Ireland. It finds that while overall gross disposable income per capita in Northern Ireland is towards the lower end of the distribution of disposable incomes, it is higher than a few counties in Ireland. However, the data are on a gross basis (before adjusting for the effects of the tax and welfare systems). Bergin and McGuinness (2020) point to the tax and welfare system being more progressive in Ireland than in Northern Ireland.

24 Modified GNI is an indicator designed specifically to measure the underlying size of the Irish economy by excluding globalisation effects; specifically it excludes the depreciation on intellectual property and on leased aircrafts and the income of redomiciled PLCs.

respect to its reliability.[25] Furthermore, according to Bergin and McGuinness (2021), consumption-based measures of living standards, such as those adopted by FitzGerald and Morgenroth (2019; 2020), do not take account of differences in savings rates across regions. In a more recent study, FitzGerald (2023) compared per capita expenditure levels in Ireland relative to a number of other European countries and found that saving rates in Ireland were exceptionally high compared to other EU countries. FitzGerald (2023) concluded that when allowances are made for this higher savings rate, living standards in Ireland based on real personal disposable income per head would be above the EU average in 2021. While there is some ongoing debate on the magnitude of output and income gaps between Ireland and Northern Ireland, there is a growing consensus that output and income per capita in Northern Ireland significantly lag levels in Ireland.

In addition to how average income levels compare North and South, how incomes are distributed across households is also a key determinant of general welfare levels within an economy.[26] More equitably distributed national incomes should, in theory at least, lead to generally higher welfare levels across the population, the more the income levels of poorer households are raised. A key measure of inequality is the Gini coefficient, which measures the proportion of income that is held by a given proportion of the population; if each member of the population holds an equal share of the nation's income the Gini coefficient will be equal to zero; the greater the share of the distribution held by a smaller number of the population then the closer the Gini coefficient will be to 1. Bergin and McGuinness (2021) found that, based on 2013 data for Ireland and 2011 data for Northern Ireland, the Gini Coefficient after taxes and transfers for Ireland at 0.309 was somewhat higher than that for Northern Ireland which stood at 0.288, pointing to higher levels of inequality in Ireland.

Analysis by Doorley et al. (2024) that uses harmonised microsimulation models for Ireland (SWITCH) and Northern Ireland (EUROMOD) finds that the tax and benefit system in Ireland is more progressive than in Northern Ireland as a result of a higher tax burden for households in the top half of the distribution. However, more than half of all Northern Irish households were found to be in receipt of means-tested benefits compared to one-quarter in Ireland. These two factors tend to have competing impacts in terms of relative inequality; the relatively more progressive nature of the Irish tax system tends to lower inequality levels in Ireland relative to Northern Ireland, while higher levels of welfare coverage in Northern Ireland tend to lower levels of inequality in Northern Ireland relative to Ireland (Doorley et al., 2024). Bergin and McGuinness (2021) assess poverty rates using a 50 per cent

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25 Bergin and McGuinness (2021) show that based on this measure, the living standards advantage to Northern Ireland fell from 20 per cent to 3 per cent in just a four-year period (2012 to 2016).

26 While there are likely to be substantial within-region differences as well, often consistent data availability prevents analysis at this level. See Bergin et al. (forthcoming) for further discussion.

poverty line in both jurisdictions both before and after taxes and transfers. Using data from 2013 for Ireland and 2011 for Northern Ireland, Bergin and McGuinness (2021) find that while poverty rates were higher in Ireland compared to Northern Ireland before transfers and taxes (40.5 per cent to 35.4 per cent), they were lower following transfers and taxes (8.9 per cent to 14.3 per cent), indicating that the Irish tax and welfare system was more progressive than that of Northern Ireland.[27]

Differences in living standards between any two regions or countries will primarily be driven by differences in productivity levels. McGuinness and Bergin (2020) hypothesised that the gaps in income per capita between Northern Ireland and Ireland are likely to be driven by lower levels of productivity in Northern Ireland, which in turn are potentially explained by a number of factors including Northern Ireland's poorer relative performance in the areas of educational attainment, FDI and export intensity.[28]

With respect to educational attainment, a number of studies have confirmed that levels of educational attainment in Northern Ireland substantially lag behind those of Ireland (McGuinness and Bergin, 2020; Bergin and McGuinness, 2021; Smyth et al., 2022). Smyth et al. (2022) provided the most comprehensive comparative overview of both educational systems and reported that marked differences existed both at the lower and upper ends of the educational spectrum. Specifically, Smyth et al. (2022) reported that, depending on the measurement approach adopted, rates of early school leaving in Northern Ireland were two to three times those in Ireland, while the proportions of young people qualifying to post-secondary level stood at 30 per cent in Ireland compared to 10 per cent in Northern Ireland. Incidentally, Smyth et al. (2022) also found that wage levels were generally 30 to 40 per cent higher in Ireland for most levels of educational attainment after controlling for price differences. Social class was found to be a much stronger predictor of educational underachievement in Northern Ireland compared to Ireland, with stakeholders pointing towards the continued use of academic selection in Northern Ireland as a major impediment to intergenerational social mobility (Smyth et al., 2022; Devlin et al., 2023a).

With respect to other key drivers of productivity, McGuinness and Bergin (2020) reported that exports accounted for 54 per cent of total business turnover in Ireland compared to just 15 per cent in Northern Ireland, while foreign-owned businesses accounted for 22 per cent of total employment in Ireland compared to 14 per cent in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, FDI jobs in Ireland were found to have much higher value added, with turnover per worker more than four times

27 Chapter 3 discusses new research on child poverty in Ireland and Northern Ireland (Russell et al., 2025).

28 See, for example, Syverson (2011) for a comprehensive discussion of the factors that determine productivity.

higher in Ireland relative to Northern Ireland.[29] However, the high relative openness of Ireland to trade and FDI does leave it more exposed to global shocks. Finally, Bergin and McGuinness (2022) conducted an in-depth study of sectoral productivity differences between both regions and reported that output per worker levels were broadly similar in 2000 before widening to 40 per cent in 2020, as a result of gradual growth in output per worker in Ireland and a decline over time in output per worker in Northern Ireland. Using formal modelling techniques, Bergin and McGuinness (2022) show that productivity levels in Ireland increase with improvements in levels of education, investment and exports; however, these causal relationships between productivity and its usual drivers were not evident for Northern Ireland, suggesting substantial weaknesses in the underlying competitiveness of Northern Ireland's economy. The fact that productivity in Northern Ireland is not well explained using conventional economic models and policy instruments suggests that other factors may need to be considered to explain why market forces are not operating in a typical way in the Northern Ireland economy, including the fact that it is a peripheral economy which is relatively less involved in international trade; its historical reliance on public sector employment and high financial dependence on the UK; as well as the broader impact of the Troubles on the economy[30] (*ibid*.). Using a decomposition approach, Bergin and McGuinness (2022) show that if Ireland had the same levels of endowments (such as human capital, investment etc.) as Northern Ireland, then productivity in Ireland would decline by around 50 per cent.

2.4 NEW EVIDENCE ON INCOME AND LIVING STANDARDS

This section provides updated evidence on both living standards and educational attainment. Table 2.2 summarises key income differences using data from both 2015 and 2022. The table shows that the growth in income levels across all metrics has been greater in Ireland over the 2015 to 2022 period, pointing towards increased divergence in living standards. Taking the most unreliable metric first, GDP per capita at constant prices, this has increased by 66 per cent between 2015 and 2022 in Ireland compared to 15 per cent in Northern Ireland, with GDP per capita in Ireland 205 per cent higher than GDP per capita in Northern Ireland in 2022. A more reasonable comparison is that of GDP per capita in Northern Ireland and GNI* per capita in Ireland, which shows per capita income 56.5 per cent higher in Ireland in 2022 after taking account of price differences. Finally, arguably the most reliable measure of living standards, household disposable income, which takes account of the impacts of the respective tax and welfare systems, was 18.3 per cent higher in Ireland compared to Northern Ireland in 2018. The rate of growth in household disposable incomes in Ireland between 2015 and 2018 was

29 Based on 2015 data.

30 See Bradley (1999) for a comparative discussion of economic development in Ireland and Northern Ireland and the evolution of the two economies during the Troubles. The manufacturing sector in Northern Ireland saw a decline in employment between 1960 and 1990, unlike in Ireland. Very few jobs were created by foreign multinationals in Northern Ireland over this period, a factor that is often attributed to the Troubles.

33.5 per cent compared to 31.7 per cent in Northern Ireland, indicating that the gap in living standards has widened over the period.

TABLE 2.2 STANDARD OF LIVING – ECONOMIC INDICATORS

	Units	Year	Ire '000	NI '000	% Diff (Ire - NI)	% Change 2015-22 (Ire)	% Change 2015-22 (NI)
GNI* Per Capita	Constant prices, €, '000	2022	53.4	34.1	56.5	26.7	14.8
GDP Per Capita	Constant prices, €, '000	2022	104.2	34.1	205.3	66.2	14.8
Household Disposable Income	Constant prices, €, '000 (Per Equivalent Household)	2018	35.3	29.9	18.3	33.5	31.7

Source: OECD Regional Economy Database. CSOs National Income and Expenditure Accounts, population data from CSOs Annual Population and Migration Estimates, PPP adjustment from OECD Regional Economy Database. All estimates are converted into euro.

Notes: The growth rate of household disposable income is measured from 2015-2018.

As previously discussed, differences in educational attainment are a key driver of differences in productivity and, by extension, living standards. In Table 2.3 we use data from the OECD regional database to provide an assessment of changes in levels of educational attainment by age group between 2018 and 2022. The patterns are relatively stable over time, but there are some noteworthy changes. The educational enrolment rates among 3- to 5-year-olds fell in both jurisdictions over the period, but more significantly in Ireland. It is not clear what drove the fall in enrolment rates, especially in Ireland over this period. It could be related to the pandemic. There has been an improvement in the Northern Ireland enrolment rate among 6- to 14-year-olds, with the rate reaching 100 per cent in both Northern Ireland and Ireland in 2022. The gap in enrolment rates for 15- to 19-year-olds, which will be heavily influenced by those engaged in post-secondary education, increased over the 2015 to 2022 period from 19 to 23.3 percentage points in favour of Ireland. This is particularly worrying as it points to a further erosion of further/ vocational education in Northern Ireland, which harms skills accumulation in Northern Ireland and will tend to further widen any existing productivity gap.

Table 2.3 shows that between 2018 and 2022 the rate of early school leaving (as a share of the 18- to 24-year-old population) has fallen by 1.3 percentage points in Ireland and increased by 0.6 percentage points in Northern Ireland, with the rate of early school leaving 2.7 times higher in Northern Ireland compared to Ireland, in 2022. Finally, there has been a decline in the rates of 18- to 24-year-olds not in employment, education or training (NEET) in both jurisdictions between 2015 and 2022, with a more substantial decline in Ireland over the 2018 to 2022 period.

TABLE 2.3 STANDARD OF LIVING – MEASURES OF OPPORTUNITY

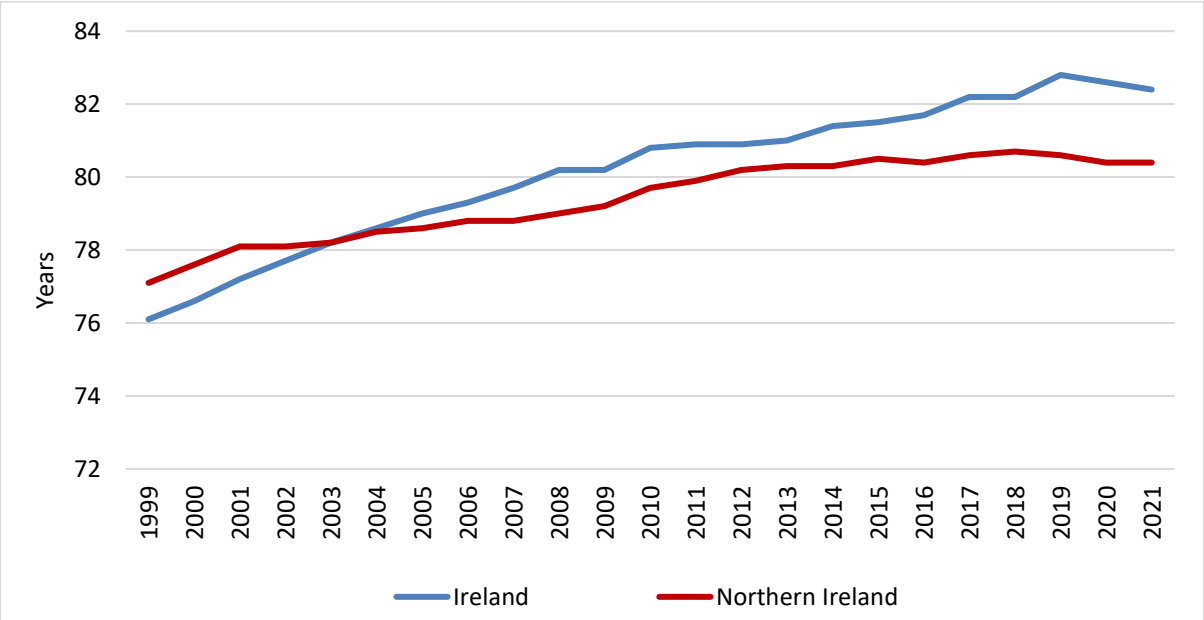
	Ireland		Northern Ireland	
	2018	2022	2018	2022
Education Enrolment Rates by Age Range:				
3-5 year-olds	100.0	93.2	86.6	83.8
6-14 year-olds	100.0	100.0	98.1	100.0
15-19 year-olds	92.6	93.9	73.6	70.6
20-29 year-olds	29.0	30.6	15.2	16.9
30-39 year-olds	7.3	6.5	3.3	4.1
40-64 year-olds	5.6	3.3	1.3	0.8
Rate of Early Leavers from Education and Training (in % of the total population aged 18 to 24)	5.0	3.7	9.4	10.0
Share of 18-24 year-olds population not in education and unemployed or inactive (NEET)	12.6	9.8	13.9	12.4

Source: OECD Regional Economy Database.
Note: It should be noted that these figures refer to those resident and enrolled in the jurisdiction and does not include those who have moved from Northern Ireland to Ireland or the rest of the UK to study (see Smyth and Darmody, 2023).

Life expectancy at birth is a measure that tends to reflect differences in aggregate wellbeing and changes in key drivers of living standards, such as income levels, educational participation, access to healthcare and education provision.[31] In 2017, life expectancy at birth in Northern Ireland was reported to be 1.6 years below that of Ireland (McGuinness and Bergin, 2020) and here we use data from the OECD regional database in Figure 2.1 to update and extend the analysis up to 2021. There has been a general upward trend in life expectancy in both regions between 1999 and 2018, with life expectancy rates higher in Northern Ireland relative to Ireland until 2003, after which point life expectancy rates in Ireland began to increase more rapidly than those in Northern Ireland. By 2019, life expectancy in Ireland stood at 82.8 years compared to 80.6 years in Northern Ireland, a gap of 2.2 years. Between 2019 and 2021 life expectancy in both Ireland and Northern Ireland declined slightly, perhaps reflecting the impacts of the pandemic; by 2021 the life expectancy gap was 2.0 years in favour of Ireland. Finally, we repeat the analysis by gender in Figure 2.2, and the trends heavily reflect those in the previous chart, with the rates substantially higher in Ireland by the end of the period. By 2021 the gap in life expectancy was 2.1 years for males and 2.0 years for females. Consistent with the literature, life expectancies for females in both jurisdictions were approximately four years higher than for males.

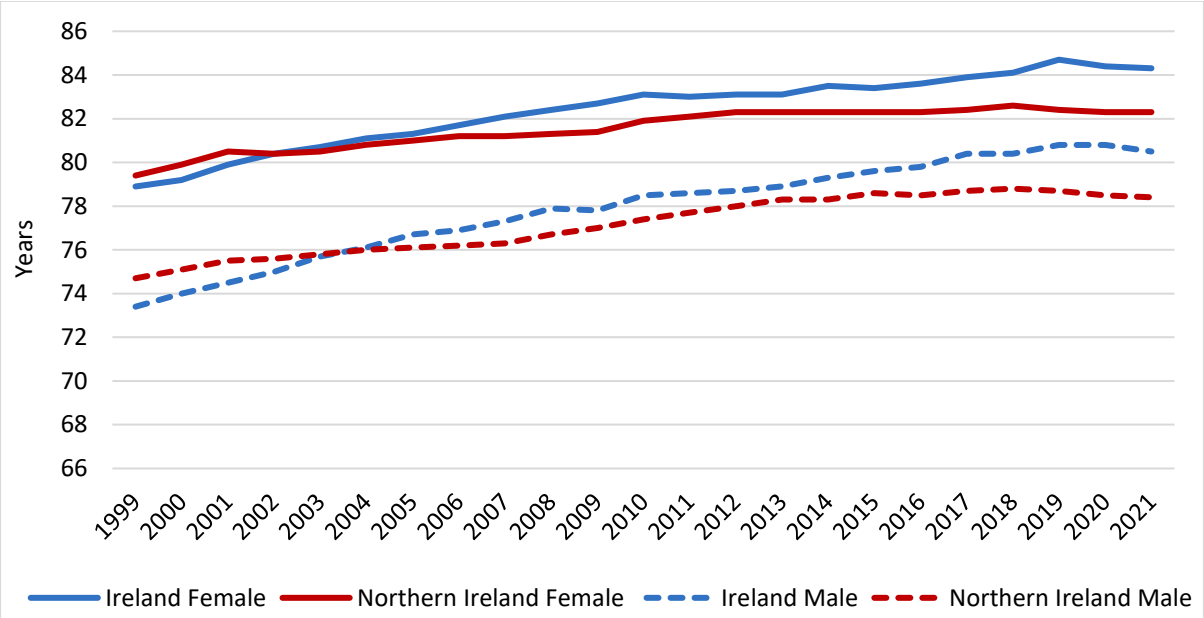
31 The overall health of the population will not only impact health-related needs and spending, but also the need for care both within and outside the home, labour market participation and the wellbeing of the population.

FIGURE 2.1 LIFE EXPECTANCY, OVERALL, FOR <1-YEAR-OLDS



Source: OECD Regional Database.

FIGURE 2.2 LIFE EXPECTANCY, BY GENDER, FOR <1-YEAR-OLDS



Source: OECD Regional Database.

2.5 SUMMARY

This chapter provides an overview of differences in living standards between Ireland and Northern Ireland across a range of dimensions including traditional economic measures as well as broader measures of opportunity and overall welfare/wellbeing. It draws on findings from several comparative studies including on education (Smyth et al., 2022), productivity (Bergin and McGuinness, 2022), and

income inequality (Doorley et al., 2024), as well as updating some key metrics from previous studies. It is important to understand differences within the different policy contexts that Ireland and Northern Ireland operate. In particular, Northern Ireland is more constrained in terms of fiscal autonomy, and more affected by experience of political instability and the legacy of the Troubles.

The chapter finds that household disposable income, a reliable measure of income that is not subject to the drawbacks of other conventional metrics used to assess living standards, was 18.3 per cent higher in Ireland than Northern Ireland in 2018 and this gap had widened over time. Access to and participation in education is a key factor in determining wage growth, career progression and social progression and represents a key measure of opportunity in each region. The most recent data show that across all age groups education participation rates are higher in Ireland than in Northern Ireland, and the gaps have increased over time for all age groups except for the youngest age group. A range of factors including income, education and employment opportunities, and access to healthcare services will generally determine life expectancy. As such, differences in life expectancy can be interpreted as a cumulative measure of differences in general welfare and living standards. **The most recent data show** that life expectancy at birth for males and females in Ireland exceeded that of Northern Ireland by two years. On balance, the evidence on economic performance and living standards presented shows varying trends over time between the two jurisdictions, though in more recent years Ireland is outperforming Northern Ireland in most metrics.

CHAPTER 3

Policy configurations and implications for life chances

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Individual programme reports focus on specific topics, policy areas and often particular groups in the population. The purpose of this chapter is to synthesise available findings from early years to later life to gain a better understanding of how people's relative conditions across the life course are influenced by where they live on the island of Ireland. A life course perspective draws particular attention to how an individual's experience at one point in their life can impact later outcomes – for example, early childhood experiences influence school pathways, skills acquisition, job quality and incomes during the life course (Mayer, 2009).[32] Life course research highlights how the impact of history and past institutions can combine to influence the life trajectories of different birth cohorts or generations, for example those born in the 1950s, 1970s or 1990s (Fosse and Winship, 2019). These cohorts might experience a recession or an economic growth period differently. History and institutions – such as the education system, the labour market, the tax and welfare systems – combine to shape individual life trajectories (Mayer, 2004). While the focus in this programme has been primarily on comparing individuals and groups in societies as a whole, individuals' own decisions will influence their situation. Moreover, *perceptions* of their situation will also influence the decisions people make, so it is important to consider population attitudes to their society and their place within it, and how these vary in different periods and for different birth cohorts. A guiding theme of this chapter is life course inequalities within both jurisdictions as well as between them.

3.2 LEARNING SKILLS: FROM PRE-SCHOOL TO THIRD LEVEL

Early years are crucial for skills development, both at home and in childcare and education settings (Cattan et al., 2024). Children's skills are strongly influenced by their parents' skills and their home environment, but childcare can play a role in compensating for a poor start (Kulic et al., 2019). Both Ireland and Northern Ireland have tended to lag behind European counterparts in early years provision and investment. Curristan et al. (2023) describe how recent policy changes have expanded provision, particularly in Ireland. Inequalities in cognitive outcomes are found at an early age. At age 5, children from lower income households and those whose mothers have lower education have poorer vocabulary skills (Curristan et al., 2023). Stakeholders highlighted how approaches to additional supports for children in pre-school settings differed across jurisdictions, with the potential for

[32] Ideally, research using a life course perspective would analyse data from the same people over time (longitudinal data) (see for example Diewald et al., 2006). However, for most of the topics analysed under the research programme, comparative longitudinal data are not available. We return to this point in Chapter 6.

policy learning. There was more emphasis on children in disadvantaged areas in Northern Ireland (the Sure Start scheme) and children with special needs in Ireland (the AIM programme) (Curristan et al., 2023), though recently in Ireland policy changes have expanded provision for children experiencing disadvantage.[33]

As children move into school settings, Smyth et al. (2022) find that Ireland and Northern Ireland perform well in international comparisons of skill development at primary and secondary levels. At age 5, Curristan et al. (2023) find that children's literacy and numeracy skills are high in both jurisdictions. Interestingly, teachers' ratings of language are higher in Ireland, while teacher ratings of number skills are higher in Northern Ireland. However, there are marked differences in educational attainment between the jurisdictions, with a lower proportion of young people in Ireland leaving school early and lower expectations of reaching third-level education in Northern Ireland, largely driven by those in non-grammar schools.[34] Furthermore, rates of early school leaving in Northern Ireland are twice as high as in Ireland. The fact that overall literacy and numeracy skills are similar but educational attainment is so different suggests that the different educational systems are producing different outcomes. Smyth et al. (2022) highlight two key contributory factors in this difference. Firstly, they point to the success of the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme in supporting and retaining students in disadvantaged areas in Ireland. Secondly, they emphasise the impact of academic selection in Northern Ireland, which leaves students in non-grammar schools more likely to leave school early and have lower expectations of educational success as strong contributory factors in this difference.

How an education system incorporates migrant students is sometimes seen as a 'litmus test' of migrant integration policy (OECD, 2023a). In most OECD countries, migrant-origin students score significantly lower than their native peers in terms of reading literacy at age 15, though this varies depending on the linguistic and socio-economic background of the migrants and their children (OECD, 2019). In Ireland, McGinnity et al. (2023) find little difference in either academic achievement scores at age 15 between migrant-origin students, both first and second generation, and their Irish-origin peers in 2018. In Northern Ireland, first generation migrant-origin students have lower achievement scores in English reading and mathematics than their Northern Ireland origin peers. This difference remains even after controlling for language spoken at home and the child's socio-economic background (McGinnity et al., 2023). Second-generation migrant-origin children in Northern

33 https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/035a5-equal-start-for-children-experiencing-disadvantage-a-major-new-model-of-government-funded-supports-is-announced/#:~:text=Equal%20Start%20is%20a%20funding,their%20families%20who%20experience%20disadvantage.

34 In Northern Ireland, standardised tests towards the end of primary schooling are used to determine entry to academically selective grammar schools, with the remainder of the student population attending secondary (non-grammar) schools.

Ireland do not differ from their Northern-Ireland origin peers in terms of achievement.

Both jurisdictions are similar in the orientation of secondary students towards higher education, with further education perceived as a 'second best' option, though the landscape of post-school opportunities differs. Higher rates of return to skills can incentivise people to remain in education. Wage returns to education in Ireland substantially exceed those in Northern Ireland at all levels of attainment. Added to that, in Northern Ireland a significant proportion of students pursue third-level education in other parts of the UK and, as many of these highly-skilled graduates – around one-quarter – fail to return, there is a systematic leakage of skills away from Northern Ireland (Smyth et al., 2022).[35] The cap on places in universities in Northern Ireland for local students has resulted in significant competition for higher education there (1.7 applicants for every place) (Pivotal, 2021).[36] This means many applicants need to move outside Northern Ireland to study, with around a quarter going to the rest of the UK for university (Smyth and Darmody, 2023). Smyth and Darmody (2023) suggest that the cap on places in Northern Ireland could usefully be revisited to enhance higher education participation in general, and student mobility between Ireland and Northern Ireland.

3.3 INEQUALITIES IN WORK AND INCOME

The skills acquired by children and young people in their path to adulthood are very important for labour market opportunities – both getting a job and the quality of that job in terms of wages and working conditions.[37] Hingre et al. (2024) find low education a strong barrier to work, and that differences in educational attainment account for much of the variation in labour market participation between Ireland and Northern Ireland (see also Table 2.1).

The gendered nature of care and its consequences for access to employment, especially high-quality jobs, remains a common feature of both settings. In 2022, women's labour force participation stood at 76 per cent in Ireland and 72 per cent in Northern Ireland, compared to men's labour force participation of 88 per cent in Ireland and 81 per cent in Northern Ireland. This contemporary picture for women stands in contrast to historical trends, whereby female labour market participation

35 The impact of this outflow is compounded by the low level of inflow from the rest of the UK, or indeed Ireland, to take up university places in Northern Ireland (Smyth and Darmody, 2023).

36 This cap for local students in Northern Ireland, including those from Ireland, is derived using the Maximum Aggregate Student Number (MASN) formula.

37 This is not to downplay the importance of engagement in education and training as an adult (see Blossfeld et al., 2019), though most education is acquired in the initial education system and research has shown that participation in lifelong learning tends to be higher among those who already have higher levels of educational attainment (for an overview, see Weiss, 2019).

was higher in Northern Ireland than Ireland in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s (O'Connor and Shortall, 1999).

Women with children are less likely to be in paid employment – not just mothers of pre-school children but also mothers of older children. The nature of participation also differs between men and women, with higher rates of part-time work among women in both jurisdictions, either through choice or constraint. Curristan et al. (2023) link more part-time participation to lower provision of formal childcare in Northern Ireland (see above). Lone mothers also have lower participation rates than partnered mothers, particularly in Northern Ireland, even though labour market activation in the welfare system is stronger in Northern Ireland (Hingre et al., 2024).[38]

Hingre et al. (2024) show how participation in the labour market drops among older working-age adults in both jurisdictions. This is also found internationally, and may be for a combination of reasons, including declining health, caring responsibilities, income and pension entitlements (Privalko et al., 2019). The drop in participation starts around age 50 and is particularly sharp in Northern Ireland; for those aged between 60-64 in Northern Ireland, participation is less than 50 per cent. Devlin et al. (2023a) investigate why such a high proportion of 50–64-year-old adults are economically inactive because of an illness/disability in Northern Ireland. Comparisons of Ireland and Northern Ireland point to a lower life expectancy (see Chapter 2) and higher prevalence of chronic health conditions such as heart disease and diabetes in Northern Ireland, which may explain part of the difference in participation for older age groups across jurisdictions. Northern Ireland has a particularly high incidence of mental illness, and suicide rates are the highest in the UK (O'Neill et al., 2019). A series of studies has found high levels of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among the population of Northern Ireland, which is associated with other mental health problems and may make them particularly hard to treat (Ferry et al., 2008). Devlin et al. (2023a) find disability rates in Northern Ireland tend to be higher in deprived areas, particularly those most affected by the Troubles. A body of work now argues that mental ill-health is a major driver of worklessness and related poverty in Northern Ireland, a potential legacy of the protracted violent conflict (Tomlinson, 2013; O'Connor and O'Neill, 2015; NESC, 2022; Devlin et al., 2023a).

For those who are at work, the quality of that job matters for both income and wellbeing. What constitutes a decent job is debated (Burchell et al., 2014), though along with employment security and the quality of the working environment,

[38] Hingre et al., 2024, show the proportion of working-age adults who are living in lone parent households (with children of any age) in 2022 is slightly higher in Northern Ireland than Ireland. That said, these models control for differences in household composition across jurisdictions.

wages are a key indicator (Cazes et al., 2016). Hourly and weekly wages are much higher in Ireland than Northern Ireland overall (see Bergin et al., 2025). However, focusing on low wage work can be instructive to assess income adequacy and signal poor quality work. Hingre et al. (2024) compare rates of low pay among men and women in the two jurisdictions. In Ireland, low pay refers to the proportion of employees earning less than two-thirds of the median hourly pay; in Northern Ireland, it refers to those earning less than two-thirds of the United Kingdom median earnings (Department for the Economy, 2023).[39] Women are more likely than men to be in low-paid jobs both North and South. Using these definitions, the proportion of employees who are low paid in Northern Ireland is actually lower than the proportion who are low paid in Ireland, linked to higher wage inequality in Ireland (Doorley et al., 2024). Higher education offers strong protection from low pay in both jurisdictions (Hingre et al., 2024), reiterating the strong link between education, skills and job quality.

Wages also have a strong impact on overall household income. Linked to higher wages and productivity, household incomes are higher in Ireland than Northern Ireland (see Table 2.1 in Chapter 2). Yet how income is distributed is also important for living standards. Doorley et al. (2024) find, using 2019 income data, that market income inequality (that is before taxes and transfers) is lower in Northern Ireland. The younger and more highly educated population reduces inequality in Ireland. However, this is more than offset by greater wage differences between high- and low-educated workers, and higher wages and wage inequality overall (*ibid*.). While both systems adopt similar welfare models, with a heavy emphasis on means-testing, they differ in design. The Irish tax system is more progressive in terms of redistributing income than in Northern Ireland. However, the level and coverage of means-tested benefits in Ireland are lower than that in Northern Ireland. Therefore, the Irish means-tested benefit system reduces inequality less than the Northern Irish means-tested benefit system. The higher level of benefit recipients in Northern Ireland is related to higher levels of inactivity there, including long-term illness and disability-related inactivity, discussed above (Devlin et al., 2023a; Tomlinson, 2013). The result is that inequality in disposable income, that is post-tax and transfers, is **very similar between jurisdictions**.[40]

In both Ireland and across the UK, children have had the highest income poverty rates of all the age groups over the past decade (Russell et al., 2025). Childhood poverty is a clear illustration of how experiences in one life domain can spill into another: childhood poverty leads to poorer outcomes in cognitive and educational

[39] For Ireland the low pay threshold in 2022 was €14.13; In Northern Ireland the threshold was £9, based on the UK median hourly wage (£13.50 per hour).

[40] Inequality as measured by the Gini coefficient using harmonised microsimulation models is slightly higher in Ireland (0.28) than in Northern Ireland (0.26), though this difference is small and not statistically significant (Doorley et al., 2024).

attainment, socio-emotional development, and health in childhood (Maître et al., 2021). It also illustrates how early life events can influence later life trajectories, as childhood poverty is associated with unemployment and higher poverty in adulthood (Curristan et al., 2022). Russell et al. (2025) show how since 2009, child poverty rates have been higher in Northern Ireland than Ireland, and the gap is widening, as child poverty rates rise in Northern Ireland and fall in Ireland. The sharp rise in child poverty throughout the UK, including Northern Ireland, has been partly as a result of child-related benefit cuts (Andersen et al., 2024). The two-child limit to child benefit (for children born after 2017) has had a particularly marked effect in Northern Ireland, given larger average family sizes there than in the UK as a whole, and child poverty is particularly high in 2023 for children from larger families (Russell et al., 2025).[41] By **contrast,** using a scale that measures the enforced lack of five **key** items **of household expenditure**, Russell et al. (2025) found consistently higher levels of child material deprivation in Ireland from 2010 onwards. This trend continued until 2022/2023, when material deprivation in both Ireland and Northern Ireland reached approximately 24 per cent, with Northern Ireland experiencing a recent sharp increase.[42] Higher prices mean even if they are not income poor, families cannot afford essential items. Comparative analysis of average deprivation across income quintiles from both surveys indicates that families in Ireland struggle more to translate their income into a satisfactory standard of living than families in similar income positions in Northern Ireland, primarily due to the higher cost of living in Ireland. In Ireland, rates of child material deprivation rose and fell following the cycle of boom, recession and recovery (Roantree et al., 2024). The fluctuation over time in both child poverty (Northern Ireland) and child material deprivation (Ireland) underscores the importance of 'period effects' described above; in particular, how some periods can affect some groups/life stages, and indeed some jurisdictions more. The specific 'period' may influence comparisons of, for example, child poverty and material deprivation between North and South at any one point in time.

3.3 HEALTH AND HOUSING ACROSS THE LIFE COURSE

While healthcare provision is relevant for all age groups, it may be particularly important for older cohorts, as health risks rise with increasing age. Connolly et al. (2022) analysed the primary healthcare systems of Ireland and Northern Ireland. A key distinction between the two systems is that in Northern Ireland, residents are entitled to a wide range of health and social care services that are free at the point of use, while in Ireland, a majority of the population pay out of pocket for a range of basic healthcare services. This is also reflected in use of private health insurance in the two jurisdictions, with 18 per cent uptake in Northern Ireland compared to

41 Welfare mitigation package in Northern Ireland means benefit cap has not been applied (see Chapter 2).

42 The five items are those common to the Family Resources Survey (NI) and the Survey of Income and Living Conditions (SILC) are: being in arrears on bills; inability to keep the home adequately warm; inability to afford a holiday away from home in the last 12 months; cannot afford to replace worn out furniture; no money to spend on self. The official Irish measure of deprivation is based on enforced lack of 11 items (see Russell et al., 2025, for further discussion).

46 per cent of the population in Ireland (Connolly et al., 2022).[43] While the supply of GPs and utilisation of many services (GPs, screening and vaccinations) is similar, there are higher levels of unmet needs due to costs **in Ireland**. That said, the most common reason for unmet need in both jurisdictions is long waits to access care. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, both jurisdictions have seen a significant increase in the proportion waiting more than 12 months for both out-patient and day- and in-patient services, with this increase particularly evident in Northern Ireland (Connolly et al., 2022).[44] As a response to waiting lists, the use of insurance and private healthcare has risen sharply in recent years in Northern Ireland.[45] Overall, the available evidence suggests that one system does not consistently perform better than the other in terms of outcomes and service delivery (Connolly et al., 2022). Both systems face similar challenges including increasing demand for healthcare services, increasing expenditure and workforce shortages.

Adequate housing is a basic need, essential to the quality of life of individuals and their families (Russell et al., 2021). Disch et al. (2024) in their review of the residential housing markets in Ireland and Northern Ireland consider whether the supply of housing is sufficient to meet the population's demand for housing. Population growth – the population of both Ireland and Northern Ireland are now at their highest level since partition – and economic recovery have led to increased demand, particularly in Ireland. Without increased residential building activity, this has resulted in record high levels of homelessness in Ireland (Disch et al., 2024). Considering constraints on supply, they note that as public sector investment in housing continued to fall in both Ireland and the UK as a whole, including Northern Ireland, the private sector was unable to provide sufficient levels of housing, particularly in Ireland. **Housing costs** have increased, though are comparable across **both** jurisdictions, relative to incomes: **housing costs** represent around 20 per cent of disposable income **in both Ireland and Northern Ireland**. The authors characterise the housing markets of different UK regions and Ireland as a boom and bust cycle, with the cycle being more extreme in Ireland. At a very basic level, the 'bust cycle' has implications for the population, and disproportionately affects those seeking housing, with rising housing costs, a shortage of rental accommodation, declining rates of homeownership and rising homelessness. Recent research by Roantree et al. (2021) shows how the rate of homeownership for younger cohorts has dropped in Ireland in recent years, leaving younger cohorts more exposed to rapidly rising rents, and talk of a 'generational divide' in housing. Russell et al. (2021) highlight other groups exposed to inadequate housing in

43 For information on uptake of private health insurance by region of the UK, see https://www.statista.com/statistics/681534/individuals-with-privatehealth-insurance-in-the-united-kingdom-by-region/. For Ireland, figures cited are from Health Insurance Authority (2020). *The Health Insurance Authority Annual Report and Accounts 2020*, The Health Insurance Authority, Dublin.

44 https://factcheckni.org/articles/are-nis-hospital-waiting-lists-over-twice-as-long-as-they-are-in-ireland/.

45 For example, privately funded hospital admissions increased by 250 per cent in Northern Ireland between 2019 (Q1) and 2023 (Q3). https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/news-item/how-has-the-role-of-the-private-sector-changed-in-uk-health-care.

Ireland – lone parents, people with a disability and migrants.[46] Adequate housing is important for people's ability to hold down a paid job, participate in education and otherwise engage with civil society. Conversely, housing precarity and housing deprivation are associated with poor mental and physical health, insecurity, and homelessness, which have consequences for individuals but also society (Russell et al., 2021).

3.5 HOW PEOPLE VIEW PEOPLE VIEW THEIR SOCIETY: SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ATTITUDES

The life course perspective seeks to understand human development as the combination of both personal characteristics and individual action, as well as the cultural/attitudinal frames and institutional or structural conditions individuals are exposed to (Mayer, 2009).[47] Thus, people's perceptions of their situation, their society and their place within it may affect the decisions they make during their life course. As Kaiser and Oswald (2022) find, attitudes are strong predictors of future actions and behaviours. While most research programme outputs have considered 'objective' indicators of social and economic progress across the jurisdictions, analysing people's social and political attitudes can capture dimensions of societal health and progress not easily measured by objective indicators; for example, trust in other people or institutions, or how effectively governments are perceived to be functioning.

At a societal level, the social and political climate of a society also provides important context for policy-making. For governments to effectively respond to the needs of their citizens, they need to understand what issues matter to people, their experiences of society, their values, and more broadly how they themselves interpret their lives (Breen and Healy, 2016). Trust in politics and institutions may be even more salient in times of crisis or rapid change: people who believe the situation can be effectively managed may be less prone to anxiety and insecurity. Attitudinal data can also indicate social cleavages in the population related to or not picked up by objective indicators.

Laurence et al. (2023b) compared a wide range of social and political attitudes North and South and how they have evolved since the Good Friday Agreement.[48] Overall they find that people's satisfaction with the political system, trust in political, judicial and media institutions, and the feeling that their voice counts in politics were generally higher in Ireland compared to Northern Ireland, both at the

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46 Their adequate housing measure is broader, capturing six dimensions; housing accessibility, affordability, security of housing tenure, cultural adequacy, quality and location.

47 As Mayer (2009) notes, this relates micro, meso and macro levels of analysis, structure and agency.

48 In Ireland, attitudes are tracked from 1998 to 2023. In Northern Ireland, data limitations mean most attitudes are tracked from 1998 to 2018 only.

start of the 21st century and in more recent years. The authors attribute this in part to the instability of political institutions in Northern Ireland, with multiple periods of Assembly suspension, and note how this highlights the importance of an effectively functioning political system which is able to meet the needs of the population it serves.

Yet it is important to note volatility in attitudes in both jurisdictions. Particularly in Ireland, attitudes over the past two decades have been significantly shaped by the 2008/2009 recession and the subsequent period of austerity. With the onset of the crash (2007/2008), satisfaction with democracy, political trust, media trust, trust in other people and optimism all saw substantial declines, while support for reducing income inequality increased. The 'lost decade' for the economy in Ireland as a result of the recession and austerity period is often discussed; the research by Laurence et al. (2023b) shows how Ireland experienced a corresponding decline in social and political attitudes, though these have generally recovered in subsequent years as the economy recovered.

This underscores the value of examining attitudes over a long timeframe, both to see the 'direction of travel' but also to explore how specific periods can influence the social climate. The variation in attitudes across time also implies that social and political attitudes are a response to conditions in society, and amenable to change.

The past 20 to 25 years have seen the emergence and widening of gaps in social and political attitudes between more and less educated groups in both jurisdictions **on the island,**[49] a trend also seen elsewhere.[50] Educational differences in trust in other people have significantly widened over the past 20-25 years across both jurisdictions. One explanation for the widening gap could be that more educated groups experienced less pecuniary hardship from the recession and recovered more quickly, while less educated groups may have felt disenchantment due to greater and more prolonged hardship. Another factor could be that less educated groups believe that they have not benefited as much from changes in society and economy as higher educated groups.

While generational differences are not as marked as change over time, there is some evidence from the data that the youngest generations on the island of Ireland, particularly those born after 1989, may be becoming more disillusioned with their societies than older cohorts, particularly in Northern Ireland. In Ireland,

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49 The exception to these widening educational gaps is in people's positive expectations for the future. In 1998, higher educated groups were more optimistic about their future than lower educated groups. But since the recession, we see larger declines in optimism among the more educated group, particularly in Northern Ireland, where optimism among the higher educated has more than halved in 20 years.

50 On the polarisation of attitudes and values by education in the United States, see Putnam (2015).

among those born after 1989, their trends in satisfaction with democracy, political trust and judicial trust have flatlined, albeit at a high level; their political voice and media trust have begun to decline; and their social trust remains low. In Northern Ireland, at least until 2018, widening generational differences are in part linked to improvements in attitudes among older cohorts, and stability or even decline for younger cohorts. One potential explanation the authors propose is that older cohorts in Northern Ireland, who experienced the worst period of the Troubles, may view the political instability of the post-Good Friday Agreement era more positively than the violent conflict they lived through in the past (Laurence et al., 2023b). By contrast the younger cohort in Northern Ireland have started to see their satisfaction with democracy and political trust decline, combined with quite significant declines in judicial trust, media trust and optimism for the future. The youngest cohort there – those born after 1989 – also have the lowest levels of social trust and highest belief that income inequality is too high.

In fact, most of the declines in overall trends in attitudes witnessed in recent years across the island (specifically 2015/2016 to 2018 in Northern Ireland and from around 2019 onwards in Ireland) have been concentrated within younger cohorts, particularly those born after 1989. Laurence et al. (2023b) suggest it may be that the younger generation has been or may feel more exposed to recent challenges on the island; the pandemic, the onset of the global cost-of-living crisis, the housing crisis, the risks posed by disinformation spread online and – in Northern Ireland in particular – the Brexit vote and subsequent debates around the border on the island of Ireland. A recent study found that young people (aged 14-25) in Northern Ireland described ongoing division in community relations, political instability and ineffective government as 'push' factors for leaving Northern Ireland to study or work, and a deterrent to returning home (Pivotal, 2021).

Increasing immigration and national ethnic diversity can also be challenging for social cohesion. Analysing the population response to immigration on the island, McGinnity et al. (2023) find, using comparable data from 2017/2018, that attitudes to immigration were more positive in Ireland than Northern Ireland. Believing that your voice counts in politics (political efficacy) was also associated with more positive attitudes to immigration, as was optimism for the future. Along with having immigrants in your social network, higher levels of political efficacy and optimism could explain the North-South differences in attitudes to immigration. In the context of a rapid increase in the number of immigrants seeking protection in Ireland (both from Ukraine and elsewhere) combined with challenges providing accommodation, the attitudinal climate and narratives around immigration in Ireland have shifted significantly since then.[51] However, Laurence et al. (2024) find

[51] McGinnity et al. (forthcoming) estimate that in Q1 2024, approximately 86,000 migrants seeking protection in Ireland were living in accommodation serviced by the State (58,000 arrivals from Ukraine and 28,000 international protection applicants). This compares to under 8,000 at end 2019 (https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/07027-ipas-statistics/).

that while the rise in salience of immigration to people has risen dramatically, the decline in support for immigration has been much more modest. Northern Ireland has also seen increased immigration, but much lower immigration flows overall than Ireland: an estimated 18,800 migrants from outside the UK came to Northern Ireland in 2023 (to end June) compared to 142,000 into Ireland in 2023 (to end April).[52] One recent survey conducted in summer 2024 pointed to increased anti-immigrant sentiment in Northern Ireland;[53] though considering a longer timeframe (2006-2023), Hayward and Rosher (2024) find attitudes to immigration have become more welcoming there.

3.6 SUMMARY

The life course perspective adopted in this chapter draws attention to age, period and cohort effects. The chapter summarises differences within and between jurisdictions at different ages, reflecting on the impact of institutions across the life cycle and how early inequalities and experiences can impact later outcomes. The chapter also illustrates some of the linkages between life domains in Ireland and Northern Ireland; how experiences and attainment in the education system impact working life; how family and caring responsibilities can impact work patterns; how education, work, and family situation influence income; and reflects on how a shortage of housing and housing challenges can have knock-on effects on work, income, health and wellbeing. That said, many interlinkages remain unexplored: this is a task for future research. Cohort effects are given less prominence, and indeed without longitudinal data are difficult to investigate, but evidence suggests that in social and political attitudes at least, a generational divide is emerging, with younger cohorts expressing greater disillusionment than their older peers. Period effects, illustrated by the association between periods of economic growth and recession/austerity and labour market and poverty outcomes and social and political attitudes, serve as a reminder that any comparison of Ireland and Northern Ireland, including the reports in this programme, are in part a product of the economic, social and political conditions of the time.

52 https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/2023-mid-year-population-estimates-northern-ireland; https://www.cso.ie/en/statistics/population/populationandmigrationestimates/. In particular, as McGinnity et al. (2023) note, flows from Ukraine have been much lower to Northern Ireland than to Ireland. At end 2022, there were 747 recorded arrivals in Northern Ireland under the Ukrainian Sponsorship Scheme (which may exclude some other arrivals), compared to 67,448 arrivals from Ukraine in Ireland by 11 December 2022 (McGinnity et al., 2023;8).

53 https://www.truthrecoveryprocess.ie/newsupdates/new-research-reveals-rise-in-anti-immigration-attitudes.

CHAPTER 4

Implications for policy

4.1 POLICY LEARNING

Comparative research can yield rich insights into the way in which different sets of policies interact to shape inequalities in life courses. There have been two broad approaches to comparing systems. The first approach ranks countries or systems in terms of a particular outcome (or set of outcomes) and is commonly used in reporting on international educational assessments such as PISA (see, for example, OECD, 2023). This ranking is used to identify best-performing policies that might be adopted in other countries. A cruder version of this model suggests policy borrowing, with a number of commentators in the 1970s and 1980s, for example, advocating that the German apprenticeship model be imported to other countries (Lewis, 2007), and more recently considerable attention being given to looking at aspects of the Finnish educational system that could be adopted elsewhere (Sahlberg, 2014). A more nuanced variation on this approach involves highlighting models of best practice which can be considered by other countries, a model that forms the basis for a good deal of work by the European Commission and OECD.[54]

The second approach focuses instead on policy learning, that is on looking at how specific policies operate in the broader societal and political context of a particular system (Raffe and Semple, 2011). From this perspective, comparative research can shed light on particular policy levers that may or may not work in different settings and on the unintended consequences of particular interventions. Research from this perspective has often focused on near-neighbour comparisons, looking at the way in which small variations in institutional contexts can result in very different outcomes for their populations. Thus, 'home international' research, contrasting the four parts of the UK, has shown the way in which institutional differences in education systems can yield varying outcomes for different groups of students (see, for example, Raffe et al., 2001; Raffe and Croxford, 2013; Taylor et al., 2017).

The ESRI-SIU joint programme of research fits within this perspective of policy learning, seeking to highlight commonalities and differences in the challenges and opportunities facing Ireland and Northern Ireland. This chapter outlines some of the implications for policy learning emerging from studies to date. It is organised thematically, with the first section looking at the interrelationships between skills, qualifications, employment and productivity while the second section focuses on

[54] See, for example, the best practice portal for mental health hosted by the European Commission: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/dyna/bp-portal/.

how policy interventions attempt to tackle inequalities in terms of socio-economic background, gender and other factors.

4.2 SKILLS, QUALIFICATIONS, EMPLOYMENT AND PRODUCTIVITY

A number of studies under the programme have provided important insights into the relationship between skills, educational qualifications, employment quality and productivity levels in both jurisdictions. **Literacy and numeracy skill levels within primary and secondary education are found to be on a par in Ireland and Northern Ireland (Smyth et al., 2022). The striking difference lies in how these skills are recognised through qualifications, with much higher rates of early school leaving evident in Northern Ireland.** The study adds to the body of research that shows the way in which academic selection in Northern Ireland leads to underperformance and withdrawal from education among working-class young people (Brown et al., 2021; Gallagher and Smith, 2000). **Between-jurisdiction differences are evident too in post-school skill formation, with a more developed further education and training (FET) sector leading to post-secondary qualifications in Ireland, suggesting the potential to develop FET as a route to higher-level qualifications in Northern Ireland.**

Relatively high rates of early school leaving in Northern Ireland have consequences for employment quality and overall productivity, with a large gap in productivity emerging between Ireland and Northern Ireland since 2001 (Bergin and McGuinness, 2021). By 2020, productivity per worker was approximately 40 per cent higher in Ireland compared to Northern Ireland, linked to both higher investment and higher skills and education levels. From a policy perspective, this strengthens the argument to improve qualification levels in Northern Ireland. However, the research indicates that improving skills alone would be insufficient, given the scale of the productivity gap. Therefore, any **measures to improve skills and qualifications must also be supported by efforts to promote FDI investment and strategies aimed at improving competitiveness at the firm level**.[55] Access to a pool of highly educated workers also influences the level and nature of foreign direct investment and related job creation (Siedschlag et al., 2021).

The rapid expansion of educational participation in Ireland since the 1990s coupled with an emphasis on attracting higher quality jobs has shown the way in which educational investment can help to lever increased productivity and higher living standards (Bergin and McGuinness, 2022). Budgetary constraints in Northern Ireland have limited the scale of educational investment, with lower per student funding than in the rest of the UK (Sibieta, 2021). The cap on university places acts

[55] On the basis of available research, it is not possible to specify detailed measures needed. Further research is needed given that analysis of the usual drivers of productivity does not explain the lower productivity levels in Northern Ireland.

as an incentive for young people to leave Northern Ireland for university, with many not returning subsequently. It is not just an issue of resources, as institutional differentiation at secondary level appears to limit returns on existing investment by dampening the expectations of young people not selected for grammar schools (Smyth et al., 2022). The process has longer term implications too, by leading to higher levels of intergenerational educational inequality in Northern Ireland (Devlin et al., 2023b).

To date, the programme has not addressed lifelong learning and skill upgrading among the adult population, a topic that would merit future research. Existing studies do, however, show that both jurisdictions face challenges regarding workforce development in a number of sectors, especially early childhood care and education, health and housing (Curristan et al., 2023; Connolly et al., 2022; Disch et al., 2024). These challenges have been identified as barriers to increasing housing supply, developing early care and education, and meeting healthcare needs in both jurisdictions. The potential for further cross-border cooperation in relation to these and other key strategic priorities will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

4.3 TACKLING INEQUALITY

Research under the programme has shown the way in which institutional systems in Ireland and Northern Ireland reinforce or counter broader inequalities. Overall income levels are higher in Ireland than in Northern Ireland, but levels of income inequality are higher too (Bergin and McGuinness, 2021; 2022; Doorley et al., 2024). In both jurisdictions, the tax and welfare systems interact in complex ways to shape levels of income inequality overall and for particular groups of the population (Doorley et al., 2024). In both Ireland and Northern Ireland, poverty rates among children are higher than for other age groups (Russell et al., 2025). Income poverty rates are higher in Northern Ireland than Ireland in 2022-2023 for the population as a whole and for children, a situation that has persisted since 2009/2010 (Russell et al., 2025; see also Bergin and McGuinness, 2021). However, the picture is more complex than this suggests, with higher rates of material deprivation in Ireland than in Northern Ireland. These higher deprivation levels appear to reflect a relatively reduced ability to convert income into an adequate standard of living due to a higher cost of living in Ireland.

4.3.1 Socio-economic inequalities

The research findings highlight the way in which socio-economic circumstances are associated with poorer education, health and housing outcomes in both jurisdictions. However, the scale and nature of such inequality is found to differ.

There is a consistent body of evidence internationally highlighting the importance of early intervention in reducing educational (and other forms of) inequality (Cattan et al., 2024; Heckman, 2006). **Ireland and Northern Ireland have a historical legacy of underdeveloped and expensive early years provision, although there has been a rapid expansion of provision and supports for families in recent years in Ireland (Curristan et al., 2023). There is considerable potential for policy learning from these recent developments as Northern Ireland embarks on an expansion of early years provision.** The Sure Start programme in Northern Ireland provides a useful example of wrap-around supports to address the holistic needs of children living in disadvantaged communities. Until recently, early years provision in Ireland has had an income-related component in subsidies to parents but did not take account of area-based deprivation in the allocation of resources to providers. The newly launched Equal Start programme[56] in Ireland draws on the example of Sure Start and other interventions internationally to provide additional resources and supports to settings in communities with a high level of disadvantage.

In secondary education, inequality in Northern Ireland is generally manifest in qualification levels but, in Ireland, grades at the end of upper secondary level are even more differentiated by social background (Smyth et al., 2022). These patterns are consistent with international research which shows the way in which middle-class families seek to secure advantage for their children via different strategies depending on existing institutional structures (Lucas, 2001; Doecke, 2023). It is worth bearing in mind, therefore, that removing educational differentiation in Northern Ireland may not be a sufficient condition for bringing about educational equality in the absence of other measures to tackle disadvantage.[57]

The two systems differ in how they address educational disadvantage, especially in whether resources are targeted on the basis of the profile of the student or the school. The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme in Ireland targets additional resources and supports towards schools serving disadvantaged communities and requires these schools to set and report on targets for students. It has been widely praised as a model (OECD, 2024). However, there are also some disadvantages with this model, with disadvantaged students attending non-DEIS schools receiving no supports by virtue of their disadvantage. In Northern Ireland, resources follow the student with additional payments (through a pupil premium) made to all schools that have students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This model has been criticised for not being

56 https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/b9219-minister-announces-details-of-additional-funding-to-ensure-children-experiencing-disadvantage-can-access-early-learning/.

57 Very recently, the RAISE programme is being piloted in 15 localities based on the identification and targeting of areas rather than on the profile of schools. The areas were selected on the basis of multiple indicators of disadvantage as well as education indicators, including attendance, prevalence of special education needs and GCSE attainment. https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/raise-programme.

sufficiently specific about what the additional funding is intended for (NI Audit Office, 2021). There appears to be a strong basis for policy learning in both directions – in targeting resources where disadvantage is highly concentrated in certain schools and linking this to specific requirements, but also providing some supports for disadvantaged students in more socially mixed schools.

International research has indicated that health status and utilisation of healthcare services vary significantly by socio-economic background (Currie, 2024; Marmot, 2005). Available information does not allow for a detailed comparison of socio-economic inequalities in health outcomes in Ireland and Northern Ireland. However, research findings suggest that financial barriers to accessing care play a stronger role in Ireland than in Northern Ireland (Connolly et al., 2022). Despite significant institutional differences between the systems, they both have long (and growing) waiting lists for secondary care services (out-patients, day- and in-patients), **highlighting the importance of a greater emphasis on service delivery and workforce development in both settings**.

Housing is an important domain influencing quality of life. Housing tenure and quality vary by socio-economic background (Laurence et al., 2023a). Research under the programme indicates that **both systems need greater investment in social or affordable housing** to address the needs of those who cannot afford housing on the private market, with labour shortages in the construction sector operating as a constraint on the expansion of housing supply (Disch et al., 2024).

4.3.2 Gender and other inequalities

In international research, Ireland and the UK are often characterised as having similarities in the set of policies that influence gender equality in the labour market (see, for example, Lightman, 2019). However, a more detailed near-neighbour comparison conducted under the research programme highlights important differences as well as commonalities between the two jurisdictions (Hingre et al., 2024). **The gendered nature of care and its impact on employment access is a common feature of both settings, highlighting the importance of (continued) expansion of more affordable early years provision and after-school care.** Similarly, lone parents face particular challenges in accessing (high-quality) employment, with even lower participation in Northern Ireland despite a greater emphasis on labour market activation. This pattern reinforces the case for subsidies for early years provision as well as appropriate education and training opportunities to facilitate access to well-paid employment.

The research has also highlighted other aspects of social differentiation, including disability and migrant status. **Disability has not been explored in detail to date under the research programme and would merit future research**. However,

existing research points to the way in which poor health status can lead to earlier withdrawal from the labour market in Northern Ireland for women and men (Hingre et al., 2024), highlighting the interrelationship of different dimensions of inequality.

Both jurisdictions have experienced significant inward migration in recent decades, with a much higher proportion of working-age adults in Ireland born abroad compared to Northern Ireland (McGinnity et al., 2023). **The study findings point to challenges to integration in both settings**, with some migrant groups more likely to be out of work and less likely to work in professional or managerial jobs than might be expected given their high qualification levels**. The results suggest the need for increased supports for language learning and improved qualification recognition among employers in both jurisdictions.** It is not possible on the basis of available data to identify the extent to which discrimination and negative attitudes towards migrants play a role in these outcomes. However, research under the programme has shed important light on attitudinal patterns in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Inequality in different outcomes can be produced and reproduced not only via institutional structures but also through micro-level interactions that shape the potential fault-lines in society. Programme research points to the dynamic nature of trust in institutions and in other people, as well as in perceptions of democracy and in people feeling they have a say in political issues (political efficacy), with attitudes responsive to economic crisis (Laurence et al., 2023b; McGinnity et al., 2023). Attitudes are also responsive to political instability, with the **periods in which the Executive was not in place impacting on the people's belief in the power of politics to improve their situation as well as negatively influencing the pace of policy change**. There are challenges around low levels of political efficacy in both jurisdictions, albeit with even lower levels in Northern Ireland than in Ireland.

In both settings, there is a growing gap in social and institutional trust by educational level and by generation, with much less buy-in among younger people and those with lower qualifications. The research findings also show that important levers of social cohesion such as feeling heard in politics and inter-group mixing have positive spillover effects on attitudes to migrants (McGinnity et al., 2023). Despite differences in political institutions, there appear to be **common challenges in Ireland and Northern Ireland around fostering a shared sense of social cohesion**, with the potential for greater fragmentation evidenced by recent riots in Dublin and Belfast, ostensibly fuelled by anti-migrant sentiments. Furthermore, it is worth noting that one of the major fault-lines in Northern Ireland, that of cultural or national identity, is generally not well captured in existing

large-scale comparative surveys,[58] influencing what is possible under the joint research programme. While, in one way, this represents a lacuna, it may have hidden advantages in turning the lens onto commonalities in the experience of socio-economic disadvantage across communities.

This chapter has used the lens of policy learning to look at common policy challenges facing Ireland and Northern Ireland. Socio-economic and gender inequalities are evident in both jurisdictions but can take different forms, depending on the institutional structures. The discussion highlights the potential for the two systems to learn from each other in how best to tackle educational disadvantage, for example, and indeed there is recent evidence of such learning in the form of the Equal Start programme in Ireland and the RAISE programme in Northern Ireland. The potential for greater policy learning and some of the potential barriers are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

[58] There is, however, a rich body of research which looks at attitudes, beliefs and outcomes on the basis of cultural, religious and/or national identity (see, for example, Gillespie et al., 2024; Shuttleworth et al., 2021).

CHAPTER 5

The nature and extent of North-South cooperation on the island of Ireland

In this chapter we review the extent and nature of cross-border cooperation on the island of Ireland. We review the evidence on the effectiveness of the cross-border institutions set up under the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA) and the extent and nature of collaborations in the specific policy areas designated for cross-border border cooperation under the GFA.

5.1 THE WORKINGS OF THE CROSS-BORDER INSTITUTIONS

In examining the extent of North-South cooperation in Ireland, it is useful to begin by assessing the performance of political institutions and bodies that deliver cross-border or all-island cooperation and the extent to which these have fostered cooperation in key areas relevant to the life cycle, such as education, health, infrastructure development and economic development. In terms of institutions, the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC)[59] is the overarching political institution with responsibility for developing cross-border cooperation, bringing together Ministers across the two Administrations on the island. The NSMC was established under the 1998 Good Friday Agreement with a remit to develop consultation, coordination and action across the island of Ireland. The NSMC has 12 areas of responsibility, and for six of these areas there are common policies agreed at the NSMC which are then implemented separately in each jurisdiction; these are: (1) Education (2) Health (3) Environment (4) Tourism (5) Transport and (6) Agriculture. In addition, there are six North-South Implementation Bodies that operate on an all-island basis, under the overall direction set by the NSMC, and are accountable to the Council as well as to the Houses of the Oireachtas and the Northern Ireland Assembly. These are (1) Waterways Ireland (2) InterTrade Ireland (3) SafeFood (4) Special European Union Programmes Body (5) The Language Body and (6) Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Agency. The NSMC can meet in either a Plenary or Sectoral format, with Sectoral meetings being the more frequent. The Sectoral meetings deal with specific areas of cooperation and involve the Ministers with area responsibility from Ireland, two from Northern Ireland including the minister with responsibility for the sector and an accompanying Executive Minister of another designation in the Assembly.

The NSMC is dependent on devolved power-sharing institutions being in place in Northern Ireland and the Council did not meet during periods when the Northern Ireland Executive was not operational. While existing cooperation and the work of

59 https://www.northsouthministerialcouncil.org/.

the six North-South Implementation bodies continues, the development of cross-border cooperation at the political level across the key areas has been highly constrained by Assembly suspensions. Since the first meeting of Stormont on December 2, 1999, the Northern Ireland political institutions have not been in place on a number of occasions for sustained periods; by February 2022 Stormont had been without a functioning government for 35 per cent of its life-span.[60]

In addition to the institutional framework for cooperation through the Good Friday Agreement there is a wide array of other cooperation that takes place between the two Administrations, in line with the principles of North-South cooperation laid down in the Good Friday Agreement. These include in the areas of energy; telecommunications and broadcasting; justice and security; higher and further education; arts, culture and sport; and inland fisheries. There is also extensive cross-border cooperation at local authority levels particularly in border regions, and by civil society organisations. There are, in addition, a number of EU initiatives that have funded projects that are designed to strengthen peace, reconciliation and cross-border cooperation between Ireland and Northern Ireland. The latest iteration of this funding stream is the PEACE PLUS programme, which combines the previous INTERREG and PEACE funding strands into a single programme for the 2021-2027 period. These funding streams focus on building cross-border cooperation through the funding of cross-border projects, many of which are administered by organisations in the voluntary and private sectors and, while important, tend not to have major impacts on the nature of policy or provision across key structural areas. Lagana (2017) concludes that the highly centralised nature of both the UK and Irish administrative systems coupled with the political connotations of cross-border initiatives restricted the genuine participation of some actors and interest groups in earlier EU funded initiatives. However, Lagana (2017) also found that the creation of bodies such as the NSMC and Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), had positive impacts on later EU cross-border programmes such as INTERREG III. Nevertheless, the total scale or impacts of European funding streams on cross-border cooperation is difficult to assess.

Pollak (2019), who is a former director of the Centre for Cross Border Studies, argues that North-South cooperation had become largely invisible over time and that tourism was the sole North-South area that could be considered a clear success story. Tourism Ireland, which markets tourism on an all-island basis, is seen as a prime example of successful cross-border cooperation. Overseas tourism was worth approximately €6 billion to the island economy in 2023 (Tourism Ireland).[61] On the other hand, Pollak argues that it is difficult to see evidence of major progress in other areas – namely education, health, agriculture or energy – where the

60 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-60249249.

61 https://www.tourismireland.com/news-and-press-releases/press-releases/article/tourism-ireland-comments-on-overseas-tourism-figures-for-january-september-2024.

benefits of potential economies of scale and mutual learning are substantial. Pollak (2019) reviews progress on cross-border cooperation in each of these areas. With respect to agriculture, while there was a high level of cooperation to contain the spread of foot and mouth disease in 2001, there has been little subsequent progress on an all-island animal health policy or joint marketing campaigns under an Irish export brand.

In the area of health, the Cooperation and Working Together (CAWT), which is a partnership of health boards and trusts set up in 1992 to serve the entire border region between Dundalk and Derry, is an example of successful good practice. Under the CAWT over 50,000 people have benefited from cross-border service provision in the areas such as ENT, radiography and paediatric health surgery. However, there has been a clear failure to extend such cooperation beyond the border regions (Pollak, 2019). With respect to education, Pollak (2019) asserts that in the 25 years since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, this largely amounted to thousands of individual projects funded by the EU and other bodies; however there was a lack of any structured coordination between the education departments in both jurisdictions. Finally, Pollak (2019) notes that there have been substantial developments in the area of energy, despite this not being one of the designated areas for cooperation under the NSMC, with commercial considerations acting as a major driver for cooperative behaviour. Examples of cooperation in the area of energy include the extension of the gas network from Ireland to Northern Ireland in 2005 and the establishment of an all-island electricity market in 2007 and an all-island electricity grid in 2008. There are also many examples of successful cross-border initiatives, across a range of areas, such as the voluntary sector (see the *Journal of Cross Border Studies*).

5.2 CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION IN HEALTH

While Pollak (2019) provides an important overview of the evolution and effectiveness of North-South cooperation, other studies have provided more detailed insights into the nature of cooperation in the areas of both health and education. McQuillan and Sargent (2011),[62] in a review of existing services, identified a series of areas of potential collaboration which included ENT surgery, paediatric cardiac surgery and acute mental health care. Heenan (2021) examines the nature of cross-border cooperation in health using the response to the COVID-19 pandemic as a case study. Consistent with Pollak (2019), Heenan (2021) points out that despite substantial potential gains from a more joined-up approach to healthcare delivery, there has been little in the way of any systematic efforts to develop an all-island delivery approach, with any advances to date mostly project specific. This is despite the fact that both systems face many common challenges including ageing populations, evolving healthcare needs and workforce planning

62 https://www.crossborder.ie/pubs/2011-cross-border-health.pdf.

challenges. Both also have poorer health outcomes when compared to other European countries, creating even stronger grounds for enhanced cooperation. Specific project-based examples of collaboration include (1) the provision of paediatric cardiology services based at Our Lady's Children's Hospital Crumlin, (2) the North West Cancer Centre, (3) Cross-border percutaneous coronary intervention services based in the Altnagelvin Hospital and (4) the Human Donor Breast Milk Bank. There are also some long-standing cross-border health initiatives that predate the Good Friday Agreement, such as the Cooperation and Working Together (CAWT) partnership, that goes back to 1992 which, as noted, facilitates cross-border collaboration in Health and Social Care. CAWT's stated objective is to:

> *add value to health and social care activity by bringing a cross-border dimension to the ongoing collaboration between the health systems in both jurisdictions, and accessing EU funding in support of such activities where appropriate.*[63]

CAWT initiatives appear to be mostly project based.

Nevertheless, despite some good examples of collaboration, the divergent approach to the COVID-19 pandemic underlines how differences in political perspectives can undermine cross-border cooperation irrespective of the obvious benefits of having a shared approach to healthcare provision and pandemic management within a shared landmass. Political entrenchment north of the border coupled with strained British-Irish relations following Brexit all created barriers to a deeper collaborative cross-border health approach during the pandemic (Heenan, 2021; Hayward, 2020). The absence of an all-island approach to pandemic management has been identified as a major factor in the observed higher COVID-19 infection rates in border areas (Devlin et al., 2024).

5.3 CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION IN EDUCATION

Smyth et al. (2022)[64] examined levels of cross-border cooperation in education. Co-operation in education was largely ad-hoc, based on individual relationships or specific projects, with little evidence of any sustained effort to coordinate provision or activities at a structural level. Nevertheless, despite this, a number of stakeholders, interviewed as part of the study, highlighted a few examples of good practice. These included teacher education through SCoTENs (Standing Conference on Teacher Education, North and South), strong links between the Inspectorates, the Middletown Centre for Autism, which is a joint North-South initiative, and cooperation on the Peace programme funding. Also, four further and higher education institutions,[65] on both sides of the border in the north-west, established the North West Tertiary Education Cluster with the goal of establishing effective

63 https://cawt.hscni.net/about-us/what-we-do/.
64 https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS138_1.pdf.
65 Ulster University, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, North West Regional College and Donegal ETB.

and sustainable forms of cross-border cooperation in the tertiary sector; since its establishment the NWTEC has received funding for a number of projects from the Higher Education Authority in Ireland. However, more generally, stakeholders confirmed that North-South education links are somewhat ad hoc in nature and based on individual relationships or specific projects and initiatives, thus making more systematic cooperation more challenging.

Similarly, stakeholders in the early care and education sector reported numerous mutually beneficial forms of cross-border cooperation in the sector, though these were primarily informal and thus ad hoc, and more difficult to sustain in the medium to long term (Curristan et al., 2023). Stakeholders interviewed for both studies reported a willingness to engage in cooperation around substantive issues and the potential for cross-border policy learning (Smyth et al., 2022; Curristan et al., 2023).

Finally, it is important to note that significant factors have been identified that inhibit cross-border student flows for the purposes of higher and further education, as highlighted in a study by Smyth and Darmody (2023). Based on data from 2020/2021, cross-border flows account for very low shares of total higher education (HE) admissions, with students from Ireland accounting for 2.4 per cent of total HE students in Northern Ireland, while students from Northern Ireland account for 0.6 per cent of total students in Ireland. Smyth and Darmody (2023) point to a number of structural barriers to Northern Ireland students accessing Irish HE courses, including (1) a low relative CAO points equivalence of top A Level grades compared to top Leaving Certificate grades and (2) a foreign modern language requirement for many Irish courses where such skills are not vital.[66]

5.4 CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION IN TOURISM, ENERGY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

In terms of tourism, cross-border cooperation has its roots in the 1960s and was substantially strengthened with the establishment of Tourism Ireland. The evidence suggests that tourism in Ireland remains substantially stronger and more developed than in Northern Ireland (Desmond et al., 2024). Relatively weaker tourism performance in Northern Ireland is potentially explained by a number of factors including the legacy of the Troubles. With respect to tourism, cross-border flows are important sources of income for the sectors in both jurisdictions. A recent study by Lawless (2021) indicated that in 2019, visitors from Northern Ireland account for a smaller share of tourism expenditures in Ireland, relative to the share of expenditures in Northern Ireland generated by visitors from Ireland. However,

[66] The take-up of languages at A Level is much lower than that in the Leaving Certificate, no doubt related to the fact that the vast majority of students can only take three subjects at that level.

these figures have been converging over time due to recent rises in shares of expenditures in Northern Ireland generated by visitors from Ireland, and recent falls in expenditures in Ireland generated by visitors from Northern Ireland. Spending in Northern Ireland by residents from Ireland was found to account for approximately 10 per cent of total cross-border services spending in Northern Ireland between 2011 and 2018 (Lawless, 2021).

Tourism Ireland is responsible for marketing the island of Ireland as a tourist destination abroad and works in Strategic Partnership with both Fáilte Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. According to the most recent data, tourism generates €5.9 billion in revenue to the island (88 per cent of this in Ireland) and supports 330,000 jobs. The total number of visitors to the island in 2019 was 11.3 million (86 per cent of these were to Ireland). In a recent review of tourism, Tourism Ireland estimates that every €1 it spends on marketing yields €44 to the island economy. However, despite these successes, a recent study by Desmond et al. (2024) highlighted that the UK Government introduction of Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) for non-visa nationals entering Northern Ireland across the border who do not reside in Ireland or Great Britain poses a potential barrier to the further development of an all-island tourist market.

With respect to energy and the environment, cross-border cooperation in these areas was summarised in a recent study by Creamer and Hayward (2023). A single electricity (wholesale) market (SEM) for the island of Ireland was established in 2007, which is designed to provide least cost electricity generation for consumers on the island. The SEM requires the physical connection of the grid in both jurisdictions and the SEM is jointly regulated by the Centre for Energy Regulation in Ireland and the Utility Regulator in NI. The creation of the SEM ensures that the ongoing energy security of both jurisdictions will be inextricably linked (Creamer and Hayward, 2023). A recent study of the all-island approach to energy generation and renewables reported that the planned introduction of the North-South interconnector would facilitate more efficient transmission of electricity on the island (Menton et al., 2022).

Cooperation on environmental issues has been limited and somewhat ad hoc (Creamer and Hayward, 2023). For instance, since 2000 there has been a significant divergence in waste regulations on either side of the border which has incentivised the dumping of waste from Ireland in Northern Ireland. The oversight role of the EU had the impact, pre-Brexit, of driving up cross-border environmental standards (Creamer and Hayward, 2023). The absence of EU common standards post-Brexit is likely to accelerate divergence in waste regulation and other environmental areas going forward.

5.5 CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION IN THE FLOW OF PEOPLE

A key measure of success of cross-border cooperation is the extent to which individuals can move easily across the border for a range of purposes including work and leisure. With respect to employment, a recent study of cross-border working indicated that, between 2011 and 2021, the number of cross-border workers increased from 12,740 to 19,282 which represents a growth rate of over 50 per cent (McGuinness et al., 2024). Cross-border worker flows increased in both directions over the period 2011 to 2021, but the bulk of the growth was due to the expansion in the numbers travelling from Northern Ireland to Ireland for work (McGuinness et al., 2024). The research identified that substantial difficulties were experienced by cross-border workers. Difficulties in meeting taxation regulations emerged as a very significant barrier for both groups of cross-border workers and it was found that these barriers have become much more significant following both Brexit and COVID-19. Other barriers common to cross-border workers travelling in both directions related to factors such as exchange rate risk, difficulties accessing social welfare benefits and poor public transport links (McGuiness et al., 2024). Constraints were more heavily felt by workers travelling south to north, with 67 per cent of cross-border workers who lived in Ireland and worked in Northern Ireland reporting facing barriers compared to 47 per cent of those going in the other direction.

Brexit has brought the issue of cross-border travel between Northern Ireland and Ireland to the fore. The UK and Ireland are part of a Common Travel Area (CTA), which has long shaped travel between the two countries. The Withdrawal Agreement between the UK and the European Union reaffirms the CTA arrangements.[67] Checkpoints and security controls were prevalent across the land border during the conflict in Northern Ireland, and a key element of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) was to dismantle border controls. Consequently, one of the core elements of the Northern Ireland/Ireland Protocol (Windsor Framework) was to avoid border controls and a 'hard border' (Article 3(1)). While much of the focus has been on reciprocal rights of the UK and Irish citizens, the impact of Brexit also affects migrants, and their cross-border travel.

As part of a programme report on migrant integration (McGinnity et al., 2023), a consultation event with a wide range of organisations working with migrants and other key stakeholders was held in October 2022. One significant challenge raised in the consultation event was concerns about racial profiling at border checks, which has resulted in considerable fear and anxiety among migrants. Some migrants cannot cross the border without permission, and as there are no routine border controls those who are perceived as migrants may be checked (McGinnity

[67] Article 3, Agreement on the Withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community OJ L 29, 31.1.2020, pp. 7-187.

et al., 2023). With spot immigration checks, the consultation group highlighted instances of discrimination, with some checks on the basis of skin colour, or sometimes clothes and language/accent; other migrants who look and sound the same as the majority population are not checked.

Cross-border work has become considerably more complex for migrants, with the rights of migrant frontier workers very unclear (CAJ, 2022). Participation in education courses at third-level or education-related events is difficult for some, and impossible for other migrants without either Irish or British citizenship. Migrants may be excluded from participation in activities such as sports events, holidays, religious events and family gatherings. In particular, any cross-border initiatives, be they from national or EU governments, or from civil society, will struggle to include some migrants and compromise their full participation in society.

5.6 SUMMARY

Despite the existence of very substantial institutions and bodies, established under the auspices of the Good Friday Agreement, to promote cross-border cooperation, progress in this area has been somewhat constrained for a variety of reasons. This is particularly the case for the NSMC priority areas not supported by any of the six North-South bodies that require a more structured and systematic approach to funding and strategic engagement. Barriers to progress in key areas such as health, education, the environment and agriculture have been primarily political in nature, stemming either from a suspension of the political institutions in Northern Ireland or as a result of ingrained political viewpoints that result in some actors not fully engaging with North-South cooperation. Nevertheless, despite political barriers and failures, gaps in cooperation in many areas are being partially counterbalanced by local stakeholders acting mostly informally, at a sectoral, regional or local level (Creamer and Hayward, 2023).

The continued provision of research on North-South relativities will play an important role in identifying areas for greater cooperation, informing policy change aimed at reducing cross-border frictions and improving mutual policy learning. Recent examples of this include the planned reform of entry requirements for Northern Ireland students applying to HEIs in Ireland and the establishment of the RAISE[68] initiative for tackling educational social disadvantage in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to state that progress on North-South cooperation has so far failed to realise its potential since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, and overall levels of cooperation remain somewhat ad hoc in nature,

[68] https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/ministers-announce-programme-raise-achievement-and-tackle-educational-disadvantage#:~:text=The%20RAISE%20programme%20offers%20an,and%20young%20people%20are%20facing.%E2%80%9D.

despite large amounts of funding allocated to North-South cooperation on an annual basis. There are clear advantages to substantially upscaling North-South cooperation in strategic areas such as education and skills provision, health, energy security, environmental policy, foreign direct investment and labour market access. North-South cooperation needs to be delivered in a much more systemised way that insulates it from political crises and inertia. Priority areas should be reviewed periodically and, preferably, have dedicated budgets and oversight systems. As is increasingly the case in most areas where public funds are allocated, spending streams on cross-border initiatives should be subject to external evaluation in order to both measure their effectiveness and allow for informed policy reform. However, it must also be recognised that divergences in areas such as environment, climate, the labour market and trade will only serve to limit the effectiveness of future cross-border initiatives.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusions

6.1 KEY THEMES

Research under the ESRI-SIU programme has produced comparative research on a range of key policy topics, often providing the first of such studies of Ireland and Northern Ireland. This report has synthesised the main findings of this body of research, highlighting the potential to learn from the intended and unintended consequences of policy interventions in the two jurisdictions. **The findings point to important commonalities and differences between Ireland and Northern Ireland not only at one point in time but in trends over time.** Thus, while income inequality levels are similar and child deprivation is higher in Ireland, other economic indicators relating to living standards and productivity generally favour Ireland, and the findings also show growing divergence in these key indicators in recent years.

Taking a life course perspective, the research highlights key differences between the jurisdictions in the opportunities available to the population at crucial life-stages. Perhaps the most striking difference relates to educational attainment, with much higher levels of early school leaving evident in Northern Ireland. This is of particular policy concern given the long-established link between early school leaving and poorer employment outcomes over the life course. The cumulative impact of gaps in income, education and employment opportunities across the life course is manifested in growing differences in life expectancy favouring Ireland in recent years.

At the same time, **there are similarities in many of the policy challenges facing Ireland and Northern Ireland**, for instance waiting lists for healthcare and the inadequacy of housing supply. These highlight the importance of workforce development in these areas in both settings. Unmet needs for healthcare and housing can have serious knock-on consequences for many other aspects of people's lives, including their ability to work, study and otherwise participate in society.

Both jurisdictions face challenges in relation to socio-economic and gender inequalities which manifest in slightly different ways. **The study findings highlight the potential for mutual policy learning around how best to counter disadvantage and support more vulnerable groups**. A positive example of such learning is evident in recent interventions to tackle educational disadvantage; in Ireland through the Equal Start early years programme, informed by Sure Start in Northern

Ireland, and in Northern Ireland through the RAISE programme, which is part of a wider programme of cooperation and mutual learning by the Education Departments, North and South.

In both jurisdictions addressing inequality is important for social cohesion, as well as the welfare of society more broadly. Widening gaps in terms of financial, social and cultural resources between groups in society can exacerbate cleavages and undermine people's trust in the people and institutions they interact with, as well as their belief that policy and politics can meet their needs, and optimism for the future. Religious or community identity was not a difference explicitly explored in this research programme, not least due to a lack of comparable evidence. What the programme does illustrate is the multiple inequalities and the diversity evident in both jurisdictions in terms of socio-economic status, age, gender, family and migration status. Yet as Coulter et al. (2021) point out, the persisting focus in Northern Ireland on the nationalist-unionist cleavage fails to acknowledge other differences and inequalities. These are challenges that cut across the nationalist-unionist divide and relate to the needs and wellbeing of the population overall, so addressing them can benefit all sections of the community.

Policy-making does not occur in a vacuum, however, and is subject to a number of constraints. It is crucial to note that fiscal and policy constraints are more significant in Northern Ireland, which impacts on the complexity of pursuing systemic reform. Policy development in key areas, such as early years provision, has also been delayed during periods when the Northern Ireland Executive was not in place. Ireland faces other constraints; policy-making can change more rapidly because of its exposure to external shocks as a very open economy, as illustrated by the financial crisis and its impact on the economy and society. In both systems, different institutional structures can also limit the scope for systemic policy change, so policy learning needs to take account of current policy landscapes in looking at what can and should be done.

Yet challenges with maintaining stable political government in Northern Ireland since 1998, demonstrated most cogently by multiple periods of Assembly suspension, have had other consequences than challenges and delayed policy-making. Analysing social and political attitudes in Ireland and Northern Ireland, Laurence et al. (2023b) found people in Northern Ireland are less satisfied with the political system, have lower trust in political, judicial and media institutions, and less of a belief that their voice counts in politics than in Ireland at the start of the 21st century and more recently. The authors attribute this in part to the instability of political institutions in Northern Ireland, and note how this highlights the importance of an effectively functioning political system which is able to maintain legitimacy and effectively meet the needs of the population it serves. While the period analysed in this research programme is after the Good Friday Agreement, a

key difference between Ireland and Northern Ireland is the characterisation of Northern Ireland as a post-conflict society (Coulter et al., 2021).

Cross-border cooperation has the potential to improve skill development, employment opportunities, healthcare provision and efficiency of energy supply, and help develop approaches to mitigate the effects of climate change. However the main executive forum for such cooperation, the North-South Ministerial Council, is currently limited to six policy areas, and the regularity of meetings has been affected by periods of suspension of Stormont. While there are several examples of good practice, other avenues for cooperation have tended to be ad hoc, relying on particular programmes or initiatives and/or key individuals. The study findings in this report point to the potential value of enhancing cross-border cooperation but in a way that is systematic, transparent and covers a broader range of policy areas. There are a number of challenges to enhancing cross-border cooperation. Not least, Brexit is likely to lead to greater differences between jurisdictions in important domains like trade, labour market regulation, and environmental protection, potentially widening gaps in key outcomes. Brexit has already made rights and entitlements for migrant workers to work, access services and travel to the other jurisdiction more complex and insecure (McGinnity et al., 2023).

There has been substantial funding for cross-border initiatives, with a total all-island investment commitment of more than €4 billion to 2030 (Department of Finance, 2024). This includes over €500 million which has been allocated from the Government of Ireland's Shared Island Fund to date.

It is important that policy cooperation and related funding should be informed by the evidence. SIU research has been commissioned through the joint research programme with the ESRI, by the National Economic and Social Council and through an Irish Research Council call for proposals. The evidence base is growing, but in a context where little systematic comparative research was conducted until very recently.

6.2 WHAT WE KNOW AND WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW

The research conducted under the ESRI-SIU programme has largely drawn on existing large-scale datasets conducted at the national, European and/or international level. In-depth interviews and consultations with key stakeholders have also yielded rich insights, particularly in policy domains that have not been well documented to date.

There have been a number of challenges in securing comparable and up-to-date information on the two jurisdictions. In particular, Brexit brought about a rupture in the data infrastructure, with the UK withdrawing from key EU surveys such as the Labour Force Survey and the Survey of Income and Living Conditions. There is now a welcome commitment by the British Government to renewing data cooperation, but the scope of the arrangement, at least at present, is more limited than before Brexit.

Another limitation has resulted from the place of Northern Ireland in the UK data infrastructure. For instance, in some UK-wide studies, the Northern Ireland sample is not sufficiently large for separate analyses of sub-groups of the population. Northern Ireland is included, and in sufficient numbers, in some longitudinal studies, such as Understanding Society and the Millennium Cohort Study, but several longitudinal school studies are confined to England only. The lack of an established longitudinal study of adults in Ireland means that following cohorts of adults in both jurisdictions, an important element of a life course perspective, is not currently possible.

In Northern Ireland high-quality information on social and political attitudes is regularly collected through the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, but no equivalent data are collected in Ireland.

More generally, future cooperation between the CSO and NISRA could further facilitate the generation of comparable statistical data. In addition, linking routine administrative data with survey data could also harness the potential of existing evidence for comparative purposes (Connolly et al., 2022). As noted in Chapter 1, these limitations on evidence constrain what we can know – the questions we can ask and what we can discover – but it is only in highlighting the gaps in evidence that they can potentially be addressed.

Survey data are not, of course, the only potential source of information. Expert interviews with policymakers and detailed analysis of policy documents can be used to yield rich insights into policy commonalities and differences and are especially helpful in documenting a changing policy landscape.

As mentioned above, systematic evidence is vital in informing current and future cross-border cooperation and related policy development. The evidence base is growing but needs to be developed further in two main directions.

Firstly, existing research at the ESRI and elsewhere has, often for the first time, identified important differences in outcomes across the life course that can feed into policy learning. Policy cooperation that could more impactfully contribute to closing those gaps for people across the island, would benefit from a further developed evidence base, to delve into the mechanisms driving these gaps and to assess the impact of existing inequalities and gaps on the broader economy and society.

To give an example, the study on education indicated higher rates of early school leaving and lower levels of post-secondary qualifications in Northern Ireland. However, further research would be needed to explore what underlies these processes of early school leaving and to determine which types of further education could be of benefit to the current and future economy of Northern Ireland. Similarly, the research conducted points to large and growing gaps in life expectancy between Ireland and Northern Ireland, but further work would be needed to look at drivers of the social and other determinants of these health outcomes.

A second direction for research relates to the topics covered by the programme to date. An obvious gap relates to climate change and environment, with considerable potential for evidence-based cooperation in this sphere. Disability has emerged as an important influence on labour market participation and poverty, so would merit further investigation, along with related mental and physical health differences between jurisdictions. Other topics that could usefully be addressed include but are not limited to; lifelong learning and skills upgrading among the adult population, income adequacy among older people, housing precarity and deprivation, digital skills and broadband connectivity. Also, regional and urban/rural differences across both jurisdictions recurred in many reports and consultations under the programme as an important dynamic that it was not possible to fully explore using existing data sources.

A newly developed macroeconomic model of the Northern Ireland economy can be used to examine the potential impact of economic shocks and policy changes (Bergin et al. 2025),[69] while the successful harmonisation of microsimulation models analysing general income inequality could also be applied to other questions.

In conclusion, research to date has documented important commonalities and differences in outcomes between Northern Ireland and Ireland as a basis for public

[69] The modelling framework in Bergin et al. (2025) allows the examination of the effects of economic policies, shocks and opportunities on Northern Ireland, Ireland, the UK and the international economy.

understanding, policy learning and cooperation, but has also highlighted significant barriers to this endeavour. The challenge for the future, both for research and for practical cooperation, will be to uncover and identify ways to address the processes underlying these different outcomes and the impacts they have on economic and social development and societal wellbeing.

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