

European Affairs Committee

Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland Sub-Committee

Corrected oral evidence: The Northern Ireland Protocol Bill

Thursday 20 October 2022

3.30 pm

Members present: Lord Jay of Ewelme (The Chair); Lord Empey; Baroness Goudie; Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick.

Evidence Session No. 5

Heard in Public

Questions 42 - 45

Witnesses

I: Raymond Jackson, Chief Executive, Confederation of Community Groups; Kate Clifford, Director, Rural Community Network; Jacqueline Irwin, Chief Executive, Community Relations Council.

Examination of witnesses

Raymond Jackson, Kate Clifford and Jacqueline Irwin.

Q42 **The Chair:** Thank you very much indeed, all of you, for coming to give evidence. We are really glad to be here. There is a lot to be said for taking evidence in Westminster but, as we were just discussing beforehand, it makes a huge difference to be here talking to you, hearing you and feeling that much closer to the thinking.

We are here as part of an inquiry that we are conducting into the protocol Bill, which is before Parliament at the moment. It has been through the House of Commons and is now before the House of Lords. That follows work we have done on the protocol itself and its impact on communities, businesses and others in Northern Ireland.

We will produce a transcript of this discussion, which we will send to you so you can check that it is accurate and correct anything you think may not be right. As I said, we are very glad that you are here. We have an hour for the discussion. We have quite a lot to get through but we will do our best.

I will begin by asking: what is your overall assessment of the current mood and attitude of the people and communities of Northern Ireland—including those you represent and engage with—in relation to the protocol?

At the same time, could you perhaps say how you feel those attitudes have evolved since the protocol came into force in January 2021?

Kate Clifford: Thank you for the opportunity to be here today. Before I answer the question, I just want to say that it is absolutely brilliant to have you here and have this conversation here in Northern Ireland. There has been such a lack of engagement from both the current Government and others who have direct responsibility for issues relating to both Brexit itself and its subsequent outworking through the protocol.

We have had massive engagement in our communities from the European Union and the Irish Government, and at NIO level, but not directly from the Houses of Parliament. That has been a democratic deficit for our communities and we all feel it.

The rupture that happened with Brexit brought sectarianism to the fore in Northern Ireland. The issue of cultural identity and questions that have largely been put to bed—not finished with, not completely discussed or agreed with, but lots of stuff that had ceased to matter as much—became something fundamental to a lot of the groups that we work with.

We are an organisation that works in only rural communities across Northern Ireland; that is, populations of 5,000 and below. We have a reach right into the border regions. We work north and south but we also work collaboratively east and west, so we are very conscious of being connected to our friends in Wales, Scotland and England as well as the Republic of Ireland.

What has changed since Brexit and the protocol is that, for many people, there is a feeling that a solution had to be found and the solution we have ended up with is the protocol. When the Brexit vote happened, it was almost the case that we had to suck it up: it has happened and we now have to get on with it.

Depending on how people felt about Brexit, whether they were for or against—we had communities on both sides—we said as an organisation that our job was to help steer our communities to make the best decision for them; it was not for us to influence that decision.

The protocol has come about and I am not sure that people are aware of what it actually is—what it means. There is a lot of rhetoric around what the protocol could be or might be. There is a lot of disingenuous talk and misrepresentation of communities out there.

I do not want to shy away today from telling you that that is hugely difficult for those of us engaged in peacebuilding. There are communities out there who feel disfranchised. They feel there is a democratic deficit in Northern Ireland. They feel that the main bread-and-butter issues

affecting them and their everyday lives cannot even be discussed or talked about because they would look disloyal to their own communities—or to the position they should be standing in or that it is thought they should be standing in.

Before I came here today, I did a straw poll of our membership. I wrote to several people and sent them the questions that you are asking today. I asked them to tell me their responses so that, coming here today, I am representing not the views according to Kate Clifford but absolutely the views according to our groups.

I reached out specifically to those on the margins, those on the edges of society who feel very much that they are politically unrepresented at the moment. That is on both sides. The conversation that people have come back with is, "We don't really understand what the UK protocol Bill is".

What I got back from some communities was that the protocol Bill is an intention to break international law, and the question: does that give us permission to break the law?

Those are the conversations happening in communities. So, for me, there is a fear that, when a Secretary of State says something like, "I intend to break international law in a specific and limited way", we have communities who come back and say, "Well, if we only throw one petrol bomb, that is specific and limited. Is that okay?"

That is the reality. Those are the conversations we have with people on the front line who have to make decisions about where they step to next. We talk about this all the time in the work we do.

I am afraid I am coming back to you again with this. I have given evidence to you before around paramilitarism, patriarchy, pandemic, protocol, political instability, poverty and posturing. All those things play into how our communities react to what is happening at present. It is a terrible burden on the people of Northern Ireland, who are already going through this awful cost of living crisis.

They are also emerging from the Troubles with civic unrest and that constant threat of either a step back or a return to violence, and the threat of paramilitaries who are still very much in control of our communities.

On top of that, we then have a Bill that people are really not sure about but which is being sold to them as something that impacts on their cultural identity—with no real dialogue with those communities as to how or why that is the case.

If it is the case, there is a legitimate reason for people to think that, while this is impacting on their cultural identity, there is no place for them to be engaged in discussion about how that can be supported, managed or changed, or where the wiggle room is.

The final thing I would say to you is that, as I said at the start, the civic engagement has been appalling in relation to just getting ordinary people to sit down, question and understand what is being put in front of them.

The Chair: That is a very sobering introduction, but thank you for that. Jaqueline Irwin, shall we move on to you?

Jaqueline Irwin: Thank you, and thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I offer the apologies of our chair, who is not able to be here. I am representing a slightly different organisation. We are an arm's-length body of the Executive Office. We are not a front-line service deliverer; we are a regional funder, and we are also an engagement organisation.

In attempting to bring you evidence as opposed to opinion, what I am about to say to you will draw on an exercise we have just completed with a group of core-funded groups that receive funding from us. That is 28 organisations working all across the region, in rural and urban locations, and with a wide variety of communities. The exercise was not done for the purposes of your question. It was a piece of work we had completed just before that, but I guess it is relevant to what you are asking today.

The first thing I need to say—and presumably everybody feels this—is that it is very difficult to disaggregate the impact of the discussion about the protocol from a wider range of issues that are on the table at the moment, whether that is the changing demographic of our society and the impact that may be having on voting patterns, or the re-emergence of a discussion about a border poll.

As Kate says, what the Good Friday/Belfast agreement did quite successfully was that, although it did not take the constitutional question off the table, it allowed people to be British, Irish, both or neither. That left room to breathe and for us to concentrate on other things for a while, with one thing and another. The protocol will be one element of that. That binary choice, real or imagined, appears to be coming back on the agenda again. When it comes to building good community relationships and a degree of stability for peacebuilding work, that choice makes for a challenge in our day-to-day work.

So, for the groups that we fund under our core fund scheme, there are a couple of things that come to the fore. One is that clear evidence is beginning to emerge of a retraction, in the unionist and loyalist community in particular, around community relations work.

The Chair: What do you mean by a retraction?

Jaqueline Irwin: A retraction of engagement and involvement in the work. It is not between what I would describe as strategic partners who work with each other and come from either a nationalist or unionist perspective; those relationships remain intact. It is more reflected, when there are offers of training, events and so on, in having less representation coming from that community.

We are monitoring that. We do not have hard information to give you at this stage; the groups did not have that to give us either. It is too early to see exactly how much of an impact it is having, but they are beginning to see that in their numbers. Interestingly, we were not seeing that beforehand, in terms of the returns for the events they were running and so on. It did not seem to have so much of an impact, in the early days at least, as it has as time has gone on.

This is where I say it is very hard to disaggregate how much of that is to do with the protocol and how much of it is around general dissatisfaction with a range of issues. They are all there and they are all real, but they are not always disaggregated at a community level. They are just part of the experience.

There is no universal picture here. I am talking to you in generalities out of necessity, but that is not really the picture at a local level. It can vary quite enormously. Among those who recognise the need for a protocol, there are also lots of people who recognise that it needs to be modified, to a greater or lesser extent. Even among those who have been vexed by the protocol, because they feel it separates them from the rest of the United Kingdom, you will find shades of opinion on what might need to be there and to what extent it needs to be there.

In situations where hard lines are drawn between whether you are for or against something, it tends not to do justice to the complexity of the discussion. That is a real shame because I think there is probably more common ground than what is normally reported in the press. It is in that common-ground space that we will be able to build something that everybody can live with. Ultimately, in political terms, that is where we need to try to get to anyway.

So, for everybody's sake, we need more information, more informed discussions and more focus on what we can agree on, and then we should move on to the parts that we do not. It would help to leave some opportunity to say that, sooner or later, we will have to reach a negotiated settlement. Let us find the ground that that will be built on and take it from there. Of course, there is a huge exigency for everyone related to wider bread-and-butter issues, given the economic situation we all find ourselves in at the moment. There is a need to attend to all those issues. We have so much shared experience.

The Chair: That is very helpful. I know there will not be time, alas, to mention it all now, but if there is information you have, surveys you have done or anything else you think will be helpful to our inquiry, and you could send it to us afterwards, that would be very helpful too.

Raymond Jackson: Thanks very much, folks, for having us here. Like my colleagues say, I would not disagree with anything that has been said so far today. I work for the Confederation of Community Groups, which is based in Ballybot House in Newry, but we are a sub-regional community development organisation dealing with issues in a lot of areas of

disadvantage in particular, especially in Newry City areas, as members of neighbourhood renewal partnerships, et cetera.

We have been around for quite some time and will have been in existence for 50 years next year. We have been involved in community development for a long time. I agree with Kate that there has been very little in terms of an engagement process up until now. There have been bits and pieces, which we have talked about, but it has been very limited up until now.

You asked about an overall assessment; I would put it two ways. I would say first that although I am in a sub-regional group, I am also part of the Community Development Networks Forum, which is made up of urban-based community development organisations such as ourselves throughout the north. So, I am not just speaking on behalf of myself; I am speaking for the wider populace.

You asked, basically, what the current mood and attitude of the people is. First, we have to admit that the protocol is here only because of Brexit. That is the important thing, as Kate mentioned at the start. Most people and communities are aware that there will have to be some checks, because on the island of Ireland there is a land border with Europe, et cetera. People are aware of that. Where issues are caused is that most people know that this is an agreement between the UK and the EU, and it was supposed to be leading on from oven-ready trade deals and all the rest, which has not happened. So there have been a lot of issues in relation to that.

At this moment, the protocol is not a priority for the communities and organisations that we deal with; it is definitely not. The cost of living, food, poverty, heating, electricity and all the rest of it are the major issues. The problem of restoring the Executive at Stormont is the second-biggest issue we have come across. Not having Stormont there to help and manage communities, especially those in deprived areas, through this process is the biggest issue we have.

I have a board meeting tonight, and we will not be talking about the protocol—but I will explain that I met with you here, do not worry. We will be talking about a social supermarket we are trying to set up in this area. We will talk about issues in relation to the local food banks and trying to get a warm scheme set up for older people in particular, so they can come out of their houses throughout winter into warm spaces. If you were putting these issues from one to 10, the protocol would be 10. That is the long and short of it, across the board.

In nationalist areas, I would say that the protocol is very rarely discussed. It is discussed more in unionist areas, but I think a lot of that is because there has been an orchestrated campaign in a lot of cases in more unionist areas; we are all aware of the anti-protocol rallies and things like that. But a lot of those are more constitutional and sovereignty issues, as opposed to trade and issues relating to implementing the protocol in trade deals.

The Chair: Thank you, all of you. That is a really helpful introduction.

Q43 **Lord Empey:** Good afternoon. To some extent you have just answered my first question, which was: what are the key concerns or benefits that community representatives that you engage with draw attention to in relation to the protocol? That goes from nought to a bit more than nought, depending on where you are. This is a more difficult question: what impact has the protocol had on community identity in Northern Ireland? Jacqueline, I will start off with you because you were beginning to go into that.

Jaqueline Irwin: As I said, it is difficult to disaggregate the influence of the protocol from some of the other issues that are around at the moment. There is the change in make-up of the population more generally, as was set out in the census and the discussion that came after the census, particularly when NISRA produced the report on identities.

Then there is the impact on voting patterns, which I mentioned before, and maybe more frequent discussion now about the issue of a border poll. Indeed, I think there is some evidence that the wider discussions that go on in the UK, particularly at Westminster and in relation to Scotland and so on, are creating a degree of unsettled thinking around identity more generally, but that is largely overmassed by the issues of social well-being and the economic situation; that definitely has to be said. Drawing on the impact of those discussions that we have had with our core-funded groups, there is definitely some degree of a return to the issue of binary choice. You may have to make a binary choice. Not everyone is particularly comfortable with that; some are very comfortable with it but others are much less so. As I said before, the Good Friday agreement allowed for people to be British, Irish, both or neither.

To some extent the protocol has reduced that part of the discussion to a unionist v nationalist debate—or at least that is how it has been presented in the media. As I say, that “us or them” type of dynamic takes out a lot of the complexity that there is in that discussion, even in terms of people’s sense of layered identity—maybe even contradictory identities at times, depending on the question they are answering or where they sit on a particular issue.

On the census, I had a look at the report that looked at identity—your members may have already received information relating to that—and one thing particularly worth noting that came out of the census was that in Northern Ireland we now have a multiplicity of identities. We are a much more complicated people than we were at the taking of the last census. We are more diverse than we were before. The identity question in the census supported respondents to select more than one national identity. That reflects the choice that they can make in everyday life—at least, up until this point. For example, respondents were able to note that they were British and Irish if they wished to, and they were counted on both sides of that result if they wished to be.

Members will know that in the 2021 census, those who identified as British only were about 31.9% of the population, Irish only were 29.1% of the population and Northern Irish 19.8% of the population. The numbers who were defining themselves as both, if you like, or as having an identity in both areas, remained largely stable between 2011 and 2021—there was a marginal shift in all that—but proportionally the largest-growing group in Northern Ireland was the “other national identities” group, which is typically people from outside the UK and Ireland. That group was made up of almost 62,000 people in 2011, which was about 3.4% of the population, and now sits at 113,000 people in the 2021 census, which is 6% of the population. That is a shift. It certainly means a shift in how we perceive the work that we have to do when it comes to social cohesion. There is much more complexity in identity now, and that has been very helpful because it has allowed people who would have sat in more traditional identities in this region to also think about themselves in a more complicated way.

When it comes to the protocol itself, it is very difficult to isolate its unique contribution to this flux or shifting sense of who we are because, as I say, of these other issues in relation to the overall make-up of the community and the border poll question.

Lord Empey: Kate, I take it that obviously you would agree to some extent with Raymond about the urgency that is developing over the social and economic situation, which has not actually truly bitten yet. We are only in mid-October; the bills and so on are only now beginning to hit, and the demand for energy will start to grow. Is the protocol registering on your members’ radar on this issue, or is it more about identity? Basically, do you agree with Jacqueline and Raymond on where this lies in the list of priorities?

Kate Clifford: Yes. It would be remiss of us to be here today and not talk about the fact that in the nationalist community, largely the communities that we work with, there is a sense that the protocol is a difficulty between Northern Ireland and England. The issue of the land border was what vexed people most in the Brexit debate, so the fact that there is not a land border is something of a win for some communities. The question of identity has been put to bed for many people—not fully, but for some communities.

In terms of the importance of the protocol within communities that are facing poverty and destitution, I do not think it features at all. It is overegged in many communities. On bread-and-butter issues, one of the statements that I had back was: “The narrative around the protocol coming from leaders in the PUL community has fed into people’s perception that their British identity has been eroded and is under attack. This has impacted on community relations.” We had disturbances on our streets for the first time in years in April 2021. Community relations work has become difficult due to the backdrop of the protocol and a lack of a functioning Stormont. It is the lack of a functioning Stormont connected to the protocol, as you said; it is not so much the protocol but the fact

that the outworking of the protocol has been a stand-down of the Assembly, and that has caused the rupture.

There is massive frustration out there that people are going to fall into destitution. The sector that we work in, the third sector, has already come through the pandemic. We were on the doorsteps, responding day in and day out. We caught people as they fell. As the welfare state has been eroded over time and the health service has fallen into disarray, it is our sector that has been the people at the forefront of the response. We had the Covid pandemic and massive poverty issues, and now there is a cost of living crisis coming down the road, so cultural identity is not of interest to many people. It is of concern to some, and we have to acknowledge that where it is a concern to some it is our job—it is incumbent on us as organisations—to create space for dialogue and understanding, and to reach agreement with people. But fundamentally our sector has seen a loss of staff and skilled workers. Our peace workers are leaving in droves, and that is about stability of income, exhaustion and burnout. I say this because, if the cost of living crisis were resolved in the morning and Stormont were back up and running, our sector would have to stand on its feet again, and our sector is in disarray.

Lord Empey: Sorry to interrupt. Is that because you cannot get any continuity in your funding, or are you just going from hand to mouth and therefore workers are saying, “I’ve a family to support, I have to go somewhere where I can guarantee a wage”?

Kate Clifford: There are two sides to that. On the one side, I have been the CEO of an organisation since 2013, and I have never had more than one year’s funding until this year, when we got a two-year budget. I cannot plan ahead; we have been in survival mode for 10 years. It is not an attractive sector to work in, so people will opt for jobs in the PHA and in statutory services, where at least their wages are guaranteed. They can then think about where they want to move to and have career progression.

The other side is the burnout and exhaustion. We have had the most unprecedented changes in society in Northern Ireland. Before Brexit, we had austerity and a peace process that we were trying to maintain by supporting communities to understand and work through it. We then had Brexit and then a pandemic. We are still dealing with paramilitaries, and we still have an underlying level of poverty that is second to none in the UK.

Our sector is the one that has responded to all that, but it is also the sector that has been the most devalued throughout. Regular investment and the promise of funding are way down the line in the priorities of many Governments. This leads to a shortage of experienced staff who can go out at a time when there is a riot on the ground or there is a difficulty in communities. They are the people who will stand on the front line and hold the peace in those communities and hold community development. In terms of the protocol, these are unprecedented times and there is instability in all aspects of everybody’s lives: people’s

incomes, the lack of Government and, as we have seen today, the turmoil going on in Westminster. When people feel destabilised, they will revert to type. Reverting to type means that they will take positions back in the corner where they feel safest—among their tribe. That is where community development and community workers are absolutely essential to the next step of maintaining peace.

Lord Empey: Thank you. Raymond, are you more or less on the same page, or do you have a slightly more localised view?

Raymond Jackson: I will respond by discussing this local area, which is a border area. The obvious key benefit for here is that there is not a land border—that is what the protocol is about, in effect. We have moved so far since the Good Friday agreement and the peace process, so I think that anything that is going to jeopardise that or create any political instability will be an issue and a worry. People are also worried about how it is perceived. The Irish Sea is, for want of a better term, a geographical difference. It stands to reason that that is where the border is easiest to patrol, as opposed to trying to create a land border. As I think we all know, there are over 300 crossing posts on the land border. I can take you from here and, in the space of 15 minutes, show you six or seven crossing posts outside the main dual carriageway between here and Dundalk.

There are also issues about our southern visitors, particularly in areas with such a large retail centre. A lot of our community work in retail venues. Retailers such as Sainsbury's and Marks and Sparks have set up in this area to attract that cross-border trade—this forms part of people working in border communities. The more that political instability grows and festers, the more likely it is that southern visitors and shoppers will not come across the border. There is a big issue around economic exclusion and ROI customers, especially for people living locally and working in those areas.

We must also talk about the identity issue: not only would travel disruptions be caused but there are underlying issues which remain within our local communities. I think that Kate has confirmed that paramilitaries are still involved and there are dissidents—they would be only too glad to jump on the bandwagon. We have worked long and hard since the Good Friday agreement to try to normalise this place. Nationalists would always have seen themselves as being Irish, and certainly as pro-European, while most unionists would see themselves as being British and at least partly Eurosceptic. That divide has grown. Jacqueline was referring to the request for a border poll. So the identity question is now very much back in vogue, and it was not until Brexit came along. Brexit has exacerbated the whole situation. You will find that, in certain nationalist areas, people say that Brexit and issues related to the protocol—but not necessarily just the protocol—have certainly brought the Irish unity issue to the fore. That is why, as you will have seen, there were conventions in Dublin recently, and things like that. All these issues have been affected by the protocol, but we must get back to

the point that it is not the protocol per se but Brexit that has led us to this position.

Q44 **Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick:** In many ways, my questions have already been answered, because you have responded quite clearly. I understand from Kate that the issues that impact communities—particularly rural, but also urban, communities—are more to do with the cost of living and the cost of doing business: in many ways, the cost of actually existing. In those discussions, issues to do with the protocol are perhaps secondary. However, as a result of the protocol issues, many of those identity issues have been identified and heightened. In that respect, how would you assess the impact of the protocol, the protocol Bill and the UK withdrawal from the EU on the peace and political process? Kate, you referred to the fact that we do not have any political institutions here, to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement and to community development issues.

Kate Clifford: That is a very long question.

Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick: I know, and I apologise. There is a runner to that as well, because you have answered the next question.

Kate Clifford: Can you summarise the question?

Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick: How would you assess the impact of the protocol and the UK withdrawal from the EU on the peace process in the communities you are associated with, on the Good Friday agreement and on community development in general?

Kate Clifford: Initially, it has significantly destabilised the work we have done. It has been a rupture in our communities. I am a child of the 1970s; I am giving away my age in *Hansard*—

Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick: I am slightly older.

Kate Clifford: I grew up in this place. In the 1980s, I was aware of huge disruption on our streets and was very grateful for the peace agreement. I started to do work in community development just as the peace agreement was emerging. When I look at the communities we have worked with, I see the distance we have travelled. One of my first jobs was working in rural communities around County Derry.

Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick: I thought you were from Derry.

Kate Clifford: We were having conversations with communities about how they might be more inclusive and how they might reach out to the other side to work together. They were really difficult baby steps. During that time, a number of atrocities happened in the communities we worked in. We were there to hold people's hands through that very difficult time. We still had police on the streets and the Army was about. The Drumcree issues happened, and there was another rupture within communities. During all that, we had something to hold fast to, which was that we had a peace agreement in Northern Ireland.

We had an ability to appeal to people about the next generation. Having lived through it, when we were going out to talk to communities, we had the ability to talk about a bright, brand-new day. We talked about what would come next, and what was to be lost or gained by sitting down in dialogue with people. We began to foray into storytelling and talking to people, creating space for dialogue and nuance, and moving away from the binary—we have talked about binary—green and orange issues, and looking for areas of commonality.

We could push the community development vibe into things. For example, if a local Protestant secondary school has allowed children to leave with very poor results, and every other Catholic or maintained school around it is producing really good results, it is incumbent on those institutions to be generous towards the one that is failing—and vice versa. We began to ask those challenging questions about how and why poverty was prevalent in communities. How could we reach out and share resources? The very nature of austerity, from 2008 to 2010-11, gave us an opportunity to have conversations in communities about lack of resources, lack of access to services and reducing duplication, because we could not sustain what we had economically. I am not saying that we made brilliant inroads in that, but we opened conversations and dialogues, and we began to understand what was determined in the past as “the other”.

Brexit came along, and none of us predicted the way the referendum turned out. The immediate feeling was, “Oh Lord, what ground do we stand on now? What is at risk?” Very quickly after the Brexit referendum, we began to hear communities talk about identity and we heard conversations that we had not heard for a long time about who they had allegiance to—“themuns” across the border in Ireland, “themuns” in the UK, “themuns” in Europe and “Everybody else is making decisions for us”. People were taking a stance for the first time in a long time and it felt very wrong, but we also felt extremely vulnerable.

When the protocol came along, a conversation happened with our Beyond Belfast group, who are a group of practitioners involved and engaged in peacebuilding. The protocol was another issue that the Catholics were for and the Protestants were against; there was no grey area in between. At the same time, we were having conversations with people in farming and other communities about how it was not actually a bad thing for trade. It could have been worse and we were going to have to live with it, so how could we live with it?

For me, the prize that we look for in all that we do—I do not want to get emotional now—is peace, and it is important. It is exhausting not to know what ground you stand on. It is exhausting to live in this place and know that people are hungry, cold and tired, and we are still debating issues of identity when it should not be the issue.

Jaqueline Irwin: In the work I do—and you can see I am older than Kate—it is important to take the long view. I try not to get too hot or cold, as I have seen so many things come and go all the way through our

peace process. I try to keep steady, all the time. I think of our peace process not as linear, going back or forward, but as much more nuanced. I visualise it as a gyroscope that requires a lot of things to be kept in balance. Some are obvious and are related to the original conflict: safety, equality and those issues with which we are familiar. At the same time, there are all these other matters to do with day-to-day living, whether on the economy, how well we have dealt with paramilitarism, how well we have developed our institutions and a structured political progress, and so on. There are many elements to our peace process.

It is inevitable that we will talk about the Good Friday/Belfast agreement. It was a landmark moment. There was as much peacebuilding going on before it as there was in that moment, but it was a political settlement and it should never be underestimated or taken for granted. It took a lot to get there, and anything that resiles from that or moves us on to more precarious ground should not be taken lightly, as Kate said.

By the same token, there has been as much peacebuilding afterwards, because the agreement itself was complicated. It was a foundation document that made some things very clear but left others to be developed later when we had a greater reservoir of trust. Some of those things have happened but others have not, so we still have a long way to go with our peace process.

Having said that, next year is the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday agreement, which represents a great moment to take stock. It is important not only for us to see where we are now, when some things that were in our landscape have changed—for instance, the European umbrella in relation to identity—but for the British and Irish Governments to work closely together and create a safe ground for everyone. Those notions of working in lockstep, keeping very close contact with each other and no surprises—all the political skills that were learned in the run-up to the agreement—need to be rehearsed and reimagined in the context that we are in now.

The political settlement—political dimension—is not everything in peacebuilding, but it is vital to everything else that goes on, as we have been talking about today. I hope that next year will be a great opportunity to take stock and to relearn some skills.

So many of the people who were involved, both at the political and community ends of peacebuilding, have gone now. They have either left this world or retired, so the skill set and what we have learned about building and sustaining peace have changed. Some of us are old enough to remember and keep applying those skills as best we can but, in a lot of the rooms where I speak now, half or more of the people I talk to were not there and did not take part in that process. It is a transfer not of hurt and harm but of the skills learned and what it takes to maintain and sustain peace. That is vital work for the future.

Our political structures at a local level, particularly in the Assembly and Executive, were working on issues such as multiannual budgeting, which is critical to sustaining an infrastructure in a lot of this work.

Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick: It does not necessarily exist.

Jaqueline Irwin: It does not exist, but at least it had begun to be talked about. There was some evidence emerging that the programmes that the Government were running were beginning to think in those terms. I hope, first, that the Executive are back soon and, secondly, when they are, that some of this important infrastructural thinking around finance and sustainable projects re-emerges in the next programme for government, are taken seriously and delivered. That is vital, particularly for our sector, because there is a generational shift happening at the moment.

The second thing to say returns to the issue of how multidimensional peacebuilding is. It would never be possible to take one item, whether the protocol or anything else, and say that that was to blame. The environment in which this work goes forward is so interwoven and complex. Small things can have a huge impact, more than you would expect, when some large things—like being without a Government but still being able to sustain work at a local community level—can have much less impact than you would expect. It is very hard to determine what the impact will be.

We recognised this a long time ago and way back in 2012 we published the first *Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report*, which was an attempt to take a multidimensional look at what is happening in our journey towards or away from peace. We have five of those reports and you will find them on our website. The sixth one is in production now so, Chair, we would be happy to come back to talk to you about that in much more detail when it is published. The report will be a strong evidential base built on statistical information that is produced by the Government and others but coming at it from a multidimensional perspective. We would be glad to come and talk to you again when that is produced, if that would be useful. Perhaps we could bring the others with us to that discussion; we would be very happy to do that.

On the impact at the moment, I will not repeat what has already been covered. The only thing I will offer is reassurance in terms of the work that Kate and others are doing in relation to keeping things going and keeping relationships open. There are two things about that. I mentioned earlier on that there is a lack of direct information about what the protocol or indeed what the issues underpinning that might be. In other words, move away from myth and talk very factually because there are strengths and weaknesses to both sides of the argument that is put in relation to the protocol. We have some groups that make space for that evidence-based discussion to take place, and then other groups that have chosen to say, "We do not know enough about that element of it, but we do want to make sure we are talking about all of these other matters". So we must make sure that we are taking a cross-community response to

meeting need and dealing with all the other social—and sometimes very local—issues that may be going on all across the region at any point in time.

I can give the committee the assurance that that work continues. It is very difficult in the economic uncertainty that we currently face, and it is difficult due to the change in personnel. It is almost like a transition moment. The agreement is almost 25 years old. If we were thinking back 30 years, or a bit before that, you could see yourself that that is a lifetime full of work. You can understand why there is a transitional shift beginning to happen here. We should pay attention to it, because our biggest enemy is taking for granted anything that we have got at the moment or forgetting some of those really important, basic lessons.

For instance, we are only going to be okay if it is a win-win for everyone. Nobody is going anywhere; we are all still here. We have to find a way to get something that works for everybody, as difficult as that is. That is a hard lesson, and we keep having to relearn it. Our instinct is to go back and to say that, however we define “the other”, we won, and they lost. Of course, if somebody loses then nobody wins. That is the dilemma of the situation that we are always in. That is the circle that the Good Friday agreement attempted to square. There is more to be done on that.

Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick: Thank you very much, and I am very conscious of the time, but I will call on Raymond, if we have the time.

Raymond Jackson: You said to be brief but just very quickly, I do not disagree with anything that has been said. If we are all giving away our ages, I was born in 1968, folks, which means I was born at the start of the Troubles and grew up through them. I know first-hand, in this local area, that Newry was disproportionately affected during the Troubles, as other areas were, but particularly so in this area as it is located in a border area with the south.

The Good Friday agreement should not be taken for granted. One of the things I will say, which goes back to my original point, is that at least the protocol guarantees no land border on the island of Ireland. That is the most important thing as far as the groups I deal with are concerned, and it is essential that continues. There is no doubt that there are east-west issues, which need to be settled, but it should not be to the detriment of the north-south relationship, and the Northern Ireland and EU relationship. That is what a lot of the business community are worried about with the protocol, I suppose.

There are increased tensions, particularly in unionist areas, and there is a strain on relationships there, especially with community relations where things are not 100%. There are also people playing politics with the Good Friday agreement and that needs to be stated. One particular party is now stressing the virtues of the Good Friday agreement and how it can be impinged upon, despite that party actively working against it, never wanted it, and did not vote for it. So we need to be careful about who we

are listening to, in that respect, because I do not know if we are getting a broad-based opinion there. As far as I am concerned, and particularly in this area, the Good Friday agreement is paramount; removing a land border on the island of Ireland is essential. We cannot go back to that.

The protocol is an EU-UK construct. It has been agreed between the two jurisdictions. In the nationalist community we do not see why the protocol issue is a reason to pull down Stormont and not have an Executive. That is holding us all back in trying to deal with all of the common areas, including the crisis we are in at the minute.

First, Stormont should not be jeopardised, local democracy should not be jeopardised, and the Good Friday agreement should not be jeopardised purely from political standpoints.

Q45 **Baroness Goudie:** Good afternoon. I have enjoyed listening to you. Having been coming here for a lifetime, I understand.

Following the recommencement of the talks between the two sides, what steps should the UK Government and the EU take to resolve the current tensions over the protocol?

I will ask the second part of the question as well. How should the EU and the UK engage with community representatives—which I think is very important—with regard to the impact and the operation of the protocol? I am not sure that anybody is really talking to people on the ground, unless people on the ground come to them. Both of these questions go together.

Kate Clifford: For me, it is the idea of civic society voices. During the Brexit debate, there was a conversation around all-Ireland-specific dialogue. There was space for people of all hues to be engaged in issues that went beyond trucks and tariffs and trade, right down to the nitty-gritty of how to access services and what tax would look like. For the people who lived in the border region and people who did business in the north and south, there was space within those all-Ireland civic dialogue conversations to talk about what it might look like and what some of the issues might be.

Since Brexit has happened and the protocol came into place, there has not been civic engagement with civic society around what the protocol means, nor about the proposed Bill. There have been knee-jerk reactions and a lot of rhetoric and the pumping-up of communities to take particular stands. There is not and has not been space for examination, civic dialogue and civic engagement. That is to our detriment.

We as organisations have been involved in the ad hoc north-south, east-west group set up by the Centre for Cross Border Studies, in which the Human Rights Commission is involved, and a whole range of NGOs from across Northern Ireland, the south of Ireland and the UK have been engaged in sustaining Strands 2 and 3 of the Good Friday agreement. These Strands refer to north-south, east-west relations, which are essential to the prosperity of this region but are also ingrained in the

identities that we all hold. For those of us who feel unionist and those of us who feel nationalist, the fact that the Good Friday agreement has concrete proposals that enable and allow people to have their chosen identity without threat towards or fear of the other is absolutely essential and core to the work that we do.

We felt very much when we set up the ad hoc group with the Centre for Cross Border Studies that we would create space for dialogue. The difficulty with that is, as everything evolved and moved over time, it has been really difficult to encourage other voices and other people to come—we also had Covid which shut us down and put us on Zoom. This meant that we could not get people into rooms together to talk through what the protocol is about and what the protocol Bill is proposing. That voice has been largely absent from the debates.

From the time of Julian Smith right the way through to recently, we have constantly called the Secretary of State to ask, “Where is civic dialogue in all of this? Where is the space for communities to understand exactly what is being proposed and exactly what that means? Where is the fact checking that comes along with it?”

We have a Government at present who our communities would say are playing fast and loose with the peace process. It is hugely difficult to work in that context and to provide any sort of assurance to communities that are taking and have taken risks for peace but are still living under the shadow and threat of those who would seek for their own political or economic gain to control and manage them.

What could be done? What could be done is to create space for people to understand what the protocol is about, to myth-bust, to ask questions and to understand what change this brings about either to people’s cultural identity or to their stake as unionists or nationalists in the long term.

A conversation has started around a new future for Ireland and it is a dialogue, a conversation, and space to check out and to look. That is not to say that anyone is going to make a decision one way or the other, but at least they will be informed. We did not have that opportunity, to a large extent, with Brexit—and then the protocol came along and it was the fourth or fifth iteration of a deal that was cracked at the last minute. It certainly was not brought about with the consensus of the people who live in this region. It was imposed; and it was imposed in a really strange way, with a Government who are largely not as democratic or as functioning as they should be. That is my opinion, rather than the opinion of the groups that we work with and represent. We are in danger of not explaining this to the community in the proper context.

When we left the European Union, we were like conjoined twins: the UK and the European Union were intrinsically linked. I gave this speech last year at the Centre for Cross Border Studies. You cannot take a hatchet and separate twins; you must unpick the link slowly, because every detachment has a consequence for both jurisdictions. So the unpicking of

the conjoined twins will take time and the rhetoric that came from government was that we would have an oven-ready deal and it was like leaving a golf club; you just stop paying your membership and walk away. We know that our human rights legislation, and all the other things that make up the body of work that has been done since the 1970s when we became part of the EU, have all been changed and fractured.

Every action has a consequence and a reaction, and that is not being explained or talked about at all. So we would never have predicted that seed potatoes from Scotland would be prevented from coming into Northern Ireland; it was only when we went into the actualities of how we would do this that the ruptures began to happen. What we are hearing is that it is either a failure or a success—but actually what we have to work out is that all this has yet to be worked out and it will take time.

Jaqueline Irwin: Thank you for your questions—both questions. I will try to answer them both. You will appreciate that I am coming at this from a relational point of view. There are many elements to this, whether they are about trade or the balance of financial relationships and so on, and I recognise that there is a lot of complexity in that. I also recognise that, whether or not we are members of the European Union, we have very close, binding relationships with European friends and neighbours, and very many shared interests, particularly in relation to how we view stability on a global basis. So I come at this from a relational perspective.

Although it is obvious that there are ongoing negotiations and that both sides—here I am speaking about the UK Government and the European Union—take differing views on quite a range of issues, it is really important that, throughout the negotiations and afterwards, there is a measured and collaborative approach to the discussions and to the message that is given out to the wider community.

There is no doubt that the European Union and the UK will wish to work together and collaborate on many issues in the future. This is a moment in history, as I said before. I take a long view on these things, so I can see that there are shared interests that will go a long way into the future. So maintaining good relationships is vital to both sides of the negotiation. We have already seen, with the emergence of the war in Ukraine and so on, that there are so many points on which the EU and UK need to work together on a very collaborative basis. So their shared relationship is important to both sides of the negotiation—but it is hugely important to all the work that happens at ground level. However difficult the negotiations are in the room, we should try to present a balanced and ongoing dialogue, because that is essentially what it is, in relation to what is presented to the wider public, just from the point of view of sustaining stability.

It is very important, as Kate and in fact everybody on the panel has mentioned, to dispel myths by agreeing and promoting fact-based information during and after the reaching of the final agreement. That is actually vital in all aspects of the peacebuilding process, because so much

of the damage that can be done has very little to do with reality. Here I am talking not only about the issue before us today.

So engage with those affected and take their suggestions into account. Their lived experience matters not only in the nature of the settlement that is reached but in the outworking of it. This is fundamentally about people and bringing people with you in what the decision will be, because they will be at the heart of how it is implemented in due course—so, if nothing else, it is enlightened self-interest to make sure that you bring people with you as you go.

Avoid using the Good Friday/Belfast agreement rhetorically. Again, this relates to the current negotiations but is also a general point. It is important that we reread the text—I hope everybody will—during the anniversary period and take on board not only the letter of what is in the agreement but the spirit in which it was written, difficult as that might be in times of negotiation.

As to how the UK and the EU could engage with community representatives, there should be regular and ongoing engagement processes. This would be an example—so thank you very much for this opportunity today. Whether it is in committee-style engagement, visits, meetings or whatever, we stand ready to support any of those things that you wish to do. It is vital to a healthy democracy.

The next thing is to bring the issues down to a specific, workable level. There is quite a gap between the high rhetoric of the negotiation and the everyday lived experience, so, in some of these matters, we should talk to people who are on a day-to-day basis affected by them—the business community is one example but very far from the only example. So move away from generalities and talk about specifics, and in there will be the solutions, generally speaking.

When the discussions are concluded, offer training sessions and ongoing discussions to dispel any myths that may linger afterwards. As I say, most agreements end up being honoured in the breach. It is really important that, whatever we reach as a settlement, all citizens are involved in making sure that it works. That tends to be about making sure that people have information and continuing to dispel myths where and if they emerge. I will leave it there.

Raymond Jackson: Again, I do not disagree with anything that has been said to date. In relation to the ongoing protocol and the protocol Bill, I suppose that to date, people have been informed about it but are unimpressed. Also, the breakdown in communication and discussions with the EU and the whole debacle within the Tory party et cetera does not help, I suppose.

But a lot of things are working well with the protocol. I know from working with local communities and businesses in Newry that good things are happening. The whole double-strand approach is important. That is not getting out there; it is one of the things that has not been put out

there and, as I said, people have different views on it. But businesses in effect are trying to get on with things, as are communities and groups and the community voluntary sector as well. That is happening.

On the protocol, going unilaterally is not the way forward. No one agrees with that; it is not grown-up thinking. There must be a negotiated outcome. To give that a chance, the UK Government should set the protocol Bill apart for the time being. If that happens, they could ask the EU to set aside its legal challenges at the same time, to give more time for a settlement to be agreed.

In relation to further engagement, it is about working with communities, businesses and others to get small wins and common ground and to build trust, I suppose. That is what dialogue is about. Then there is trying to develop longer-term strategies for divergence, and a range of issues, that come after. I agree with Kate. I was on a number of Zoom meetings with the previous Secretary of State, Brandon Lewis, in relation to the protocol issue, but it was only piecemeal stuff and it did not really get anywhere, so it was not real engagement.

But there are things that can be done. The DfC and DAERA are the two main departments here in the north that have funded, and continue to fund, community development both rurally and in urban areas. There is the Community Development Networks Forum, the rural support networks and other organisations. There are plenty of people who can be engaged with, but whether people will take that opportunity I am not sure.

I agree, though, about the EU. Maroš Šefčovič came here to Newry, met people and saw the place. I did not see any UK Ministers coming here and asking to be taken around to see what is happening on the border, and so on. I am sure you will have heard that response from members of the Chambers of Commerce and others. There has been very limited engagement to date, but there are any number of opportunities to do it. Whether people want to do it is another question.

Baroness Goudie: It is important to get it for the record, though. We are getting this session recorded so that it is not just hearsay. It is really important.

Kate Clifford: It is hugely important to say that about the engagement that we had. Michel Barnier came to Dungannon and had conversations with us. Maroš Šefčovič has been and gone. We have had the German delegation, the Finnish delegation and the Portuguese delegation. We have entertained, talked to and had time with people to help them to understand exactly what is going on on the ground here with our communities, and we have not had that engagement from the British Government.

Baroness Goudie: This is why it is important for us to come to you today: to get some of this information on the record, in *Hansard*. It makes it easier for us to talk about this and ask, "Why aren't you doing

this?" They know that they are not doing this, but you know where I am coming from.

Kate Clifford: Yes.

Raymond Jackson: It would be wrong to say that there is no engagement. There has been some, but it has been extremely limited.

Baroness Goudie: Yes. It would be very easy to have good engagement.

Raymond Jackson: There is lots of partnership working throughout Northern Ireland anyway. The departments have all our details, and if requested, we will call the right people to the right tables as required. I am assuming that is why we could be invited by you here today: because we have been taking part in peacebuilding programmes, in discussions with the Secretary of State and others at different times, and in representations through those departments.

Kate Clifford: It is important to talk about Northern Ireland as a region. I have sat in meetings with people who have been involved in trade and commerce, and we have sat as a third-sector organisation, but we have also sat with people who are decision-makers in other sectors. There is a large sense of consensus about stuff that needs to be worked out and stuff that needs to be done. The democratic result of the Brexit referendum was accepted, but there is also a real disappointment about the outworkings of Brexit. There could have been a lot more conversation and negotiation, and we could have got a better deal that caused less rupture, less isolation, in communities had we had the dialogue. That is not to say that we are looking back with 20/20 vision, but, really and truly, if the Good Friday agreement is held by the people who really value it, we should have had intentional dialogue and civic engagement right from the start.

Raymond Jackson: From day one.

The Chair: Thank you very much indeed, all of you. You have given us a great deal to think about, to be honest, and made it even more important, I think, having listened to you, that we came to hear you. I think we all feel that, so thank you. If we could get papers from you and talk to you in future, I think we would be very happy to do that. It will not always be person to person, but we can do it. The only advantage of Covid, perhaps, is that we can more easily now have conversations on Zoom and in other ways, and very productive ones. I think we would all be glad to do that; I certainly would be glad to do that.

Let us hope that this is the start of a relationship that we will try to build up as we go along. For now, thank you very much indeed.