

**Written evidence submitted by Dr Andrew Sanders, relating to the operation of  
The Windsor Framework  
[OWF0004]**

I am a scholar of Northern Irish politics, currently working as a senior lecturer in politics at De Montfort University in Leicester. I completed my PhD in Politics and International Studies at Queen's University Belfast in 2008 and have since published multiple research articles in a host of peer-reviewed journals. I have also authored three books, the most recent of which examined the historical role of the United States of America in the peace process in Northern Ireland. I have recently been working on a variety of research projects that seek to examine the peace process from a range of perspectives. One of these projects is an assessment of the impact of the UK's departure on the peace process from the perspective of organisations that have received EU PEACE funding under the PEACE IV scheme. This project informs my statement below.

“Northern Ireland’s access to EU funds”

The Windsor Framework is a document that primarily sought to create new parameters for trade between England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Indeed, the UK Government, in June 2023, described the Framework as “providing a fundamentally new set of arrangements to restore the smooth flow of trade within the UK internal market; safeguard Northern Ireland’s place in the Union; and address the democratic deficit that was otherwise at the heart of the original Northern Ireland Protocol.”<sup>1</sup>

An often-overlooked dimension to the UK’s departure from the European Union, particularly from the perspective of Northern Ireland, is the potential impact on EU support for the myriad peace projects that depend on external support. It is in this context that I believe the topic of “Northern Ireland’s access to EU funds”, must be considered, in addition to the obviously significant conversations around trade. This is significant given the attention that has been directed towards the idea of protecting the 1998 peace agreement known variously as the Belfast Agreement and Good Friday Agreement throughout the “Brexit” process.

The Windsor Framework was very clear in its intention vis-à-vis the peace agreement:

This agreement, and the unilateral commitments from the Government that also accompany it, protect the economic rights of the people of Northern Ireland and respect for the aspirations and identity of all communities, as is the responsibility of the sovereign Government under the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement. And it restores the delicate balance inherent in that Agreement, recognising the interlocking and interdependent nature of all three strands which the old Protocol had disturbed.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> HM Government “The Windsor Framework - further detail and publications”, 9 June 2023, last updated 29 September 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/the-windsor-framework-further-detail-and-publications>.

<sup>2</sup> HM Government “The Windsor Framework: A New Way Forward”, February 2023, pp. 3-4.

Further:

While the original Protocol ensured that any application of EU rules, and ECJ oversight, was subject to ongoing democratic consent, that was insufficient on its own to address concerns about the role of EU courts, as well as how to respect and protect the voice and interests of all communities in Northern Ireland.<sup>3</sup>

Concern for upholding the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement is emphasised repeatedly throughout the Windsor Framework document. The focus, however, is on the ways in which the navigation of trade considerations relevant to the UK's departure from the EU might have created circumstances that undermine the 1998 agreement.

The Windsor Framework does not, however, acknowledge the ways in which direct EU support for the peace process might be impacted. The Withdrawal Agreement itself only commits to future funding for Northern Ireland in the singular:

RECALLING the Union's and the United Kingdom's commitments to the North South PEACE and INTERREG funding programmes under the current multi-annual financial framework and to the maintaining of the current funding proportions for the future programme.<sup>4</sup>

Between 1995 and 2020, approximately €2.3bn was invested in Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic of Ireland. Approximately €1.6bn of this amount was from the European Commission, and the remainder from the Government of Ireland and the Northern Ireland Executive.

Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic of Ireland are currently beneficiaries of the PEACEPLUS partnership. PEACEPLUS is scheduled to run 2021-2027, two years before the scheduled dissolution of the current parliament. PEACEPLUS, and the €1.1bn support it brings, is funded by the European Commission, the UK Government, the Irish Government, and the Northern Ireland Executive and is administered by the Special EU Programmes Body.

Clearly the conclusion of PEACEPLUS, indicated in the Withdrawal Agreement and even in the change in naming convention (it is significant that PEACE V was not utilised, conveying as it does the continuing pattern of financial support for organisations), represents the conclusion of EU support for peace programmes in Northern Ireland. The question of Northern Ireland's access to EU funds surely, therefore must be addressed through this context: if Northern Ireland no longer has access to EU funds, what will be the impact on organisations committed to post-conflict reconciliation activities and how might this impact be mitigated by the governments of the UK and Ireland, and the Northern Ireland Executive?

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<sup>3</sup> HM Government "The Windsor Framework: A New Way Forward", February 2023, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> European Union "Agreement on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community 2019/C 384 I/01", 12/11/2019, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12019W/TXT%2802%29>.

In 2019, I conducted a series of research interviews as part of my role at Texas A&M University San Antonio, with all appropriate research and ethical approval. In these interviews, I met with representatives of organisations that had received support through the PEACE IV programme. Among the questions asked of these representatives was the importance of the PEACE IV funding for their activities. In all cases, this was described as “essential”, “very important”, or similar. Many noted that their work could not have taken place without the funding. Most were of the view that alternative sources of support were not available to them.

It is my belief that when reviewing arrangements with the European Union, as they pertain to Northern Ireland, the significance of EU-funded community development activities as part of these post-conflict reconciliation programmes must be taken into account. Further, it would be useful for the UK Government to conduct a fuller audit of the organisations active in PEACE and INTERREG activities to assert the utility of maintaining this work in the post-PEACE-PLUS period.

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