

UK's Withdrawal from the European Union

Statement: Dundalk Chamber of Commerce.

Dundalk Chamber of Commerce is a long established organisation dating back to the 1890's and is a highly respected body, at both local and a national level. Dundalk Chamber of Commerce will not shy from its responsibility to drive the most meaningful position forward for its membership and for the entire economy post Brexit and we stand ready to work in partnership with all other stakeholders including Government from both sides of the border to progress the notion of an open Border for the benefit of the Island of Ireland. Dundalk Chamber have a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Newry Chamber of Trade and Commerce, and we also work closely with Warrenpoint and Killeel Chambers of Commerce. Our joint chambers have previously presented to an Oireachtas Committee on cross border issues.

Open Border

The Irish Government, The Northern Ireland Executive (when sitting) and UK governments have been unanimous in their view that we must maintain the openness of the border which we enjoyed today, 'they' have pledged to work for special arrangements that take account of Northern Ireland's unique relationship with the Irish Republic. The importance of maintaining an open border has been included in the letter by Theresa May, British Prime Minister in her correspondence when triggering article 50, has asked for " a creative and flexible approach to the border question".

The European Council's draft guidelines, which commit to helping to uphold the Good Friday Agreement, also note the need for creative and flexible solutions to Ireland UK issues are greatly encouraging

The Border crossing at Killeen which separates the Republic of Ireland from Northern Ireland situated between Dundalk and Newry is currently marked only by a miles per hour (MPH) speed control road sign.

Around 30,000 people cross the border along its 500kilometre length every day. About 3000 people cross the border (both ways) between Dundalk and Newry every day to work. Workers travelling to Dundalk from some of the small villages dotted on the Northern side of the border might have to cross the border at four 4 different crossing points before finally arriving in Dundalk.

Dundalk Chamber is justifiably concerned that the reinstatement of any kind of hard border would have obvious negative consequences for cross-border trade and economic activity.

Dundalk as a frontier Town situated 11 kilometres from the border on the M1 Dublin - Belfast corridor, acknowledge that our members and general business community are very concerned at the prospect of the imposition of a Hard Border. There is a real fear within border communities that any reinstatement of a border may impact on the 'hard earned' peace process.

Dundalk businesses in particular are uniquely affected by the perceived threat of a closed, or hard, border. Many of our businesses are reliant on cross-border flows of labour, trade and customers. Equally serious would be the effect of resurrecting any 'symbol' of division in an Town emerging from impact of the 'Troubles', which had such an adverse effect on business in Dundalk for many years. Many communities and groups in Dundalk and Newry are working hard to foster greater reconciliation, shared understanding and partnership between both sides of the political divide

Over the last few months, we are already witnessing the consequences of Brexit; currency fluctuations producing even greater uncertainty; low investment confidence particularly in the retail sector, lower consumer confidence in general. It is particularly frustrating to see that our SMEs and indeed larger multi nationals are still reluctant to invest, uncertainty has led to “a wait and see approach” to further expansion for many firms.

On a positive note Dundalk has benefited from a number of firms from Northern Ireland seeking to open businesses in Dundalk as a direct result of Brexit, Admac a company based in Craigavon Northern Ireland is a case in point, has announced a 100 new jobs coming to the town which is to be welcomed, although inquiries for ‘Brass Plate’ business addresses is of little or no value to the town.

Many of the local indigenous small medium enterprises SME sector would naturally trade directly with the UK and recent currency fluctuations have made trading conditions very difficult for some. There is a real fear that if open market trading conditions are not maintained with the UK that some of the local companies may have to move operations to the UK.

Dundalk Chamber of Commerce as a leading business organisation can see no other option than to keep the border, open for trade and the movement of people.

A Common travel area is a vital part of everyday life for communities living along the border. Its facilitates the movements of tourists into the Carlingford and Slieve Gullion tourist area and provides easy access for workers to travel and work in either side of the border

From the UK’s perspective, keeping the Common Travel Area after Brexit would provide a Significant backdoor to an EU member state. More importantly, it would preserve the ‘cross Border’ freedoms that many in Northern Ireland see as central to their livelihood lifestyle, identity, and political outlook. There is little doubt that open border has contributed significantly to the current period of stability and peace on the Island of Ireland.

Dundalk Chamber recognise that the new economic challenges facing our region and country are best addressed by seeking all Ireland political party support, and that those 'parties' actively seek platforms where our fellow EU member states can recognise/understand and support the unique position of the island of Ireland within the EU.