

# REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

## RECOGNISING FUNCTIONAL TERRITORIES

### POSITION PAPER

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An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha agus Trádála  
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD) would like to acknowledge the funding and support of this initiative through the 'Reconciliation Fund' administered by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Foreign Affairs and Trade, under the project title "Models of Spatial Planning and Development in a Post-Brexit Landscape: Collaborating across External Borders". To those who completed the online surveys and/or gave feedback to earlier drafts of both the Issues Papers and Position Papers, as part of this series, we thank you sincerely for your generous contributions and guidance. In addition, the ICLRD would like to acknowledge the partners and affiliates of the ICLRD who provided the time of their staff to work on this research programme, namely Maynooth University, Ulster University, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick and, more recently, the Institute for Action Research.

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## SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this position paper is to examine cross-border regional development and functional geographies on the island of Ireland. In doing so, this paper unpacks the challenges presented by Brexit on existing governance arrangements managing regional development and shaping functional geographies that occur along the Irish border.

Securing regional development has been a focus of government policy in Ireland and Northern Ireland for many decades, which has found spatial expression in both the *Regional Development Strategy* (RDS) for Northern Ireland (DRDNI, 2010) and Ireland's recent *National Planning Framework* (DoHPLG, 2018). Evidence over the past decade has suggested that much of the cross-border area has not been considered a proper functional area (Nauwelaers, *et al.*, 2013), partly due to the region's particular political and social history, its underlying and enduring problems of intrinsic peripherality, and in more recent post-conflict years, the impact of the global recession (Bradley and Best, 2012). However, other data, particularly commuting patterns, captured in the recent *Atlas of the Island of Ireland* (Gleeson *et al.*, 2015) indicates the emergence of functional geographies along the border.

In the context of Brexit, the position paper provides critical commentary on the potential and perceived implications to regional development and functional geographies along the Irish border. Although cross-border relationships between Ireland and Northern Ireland has a particular history, and has created a unique situation for regional development and related functional geographies, this paper also includes case studies that offer further insight into other cross-border collaborative governance instruments that manage functional geographies and regional development.

The evidence informing this paper has been gathered through a combination of:

- An analysis of secondary data, including current debates on Brexit from the media, academic literature on regional development and functional geographies, and published work on cross-border operations;
- A recent stakeholder survey, involving 24 respondents from across public administration, private sector, civil society and academic sector in both Ireland and Northern Ireland. A list of sectoral representation is included in Appendix 1;
- A review of case studies, which examine cross-border spatial planning and governance instruments between EU and non-EU members, to draw out good practice that could offer insights for shaping post-Brexit relationships on the island of Ireland.

At the time of conducting this research and preparing this position paper, the Brexit context remains fluid. In the absence of agreed solutions, this report offers some critical commentary and constructive suggestions to inform future thinking and action related to cross-border spatial planning and governance.

The position paper is structured as follows. Firstly, a history of cross-border collaboration relating to regional development and functional geographies is outlined, which provides a synopsis of the wider review presented in the earlier issues paper (Blair & Rafferty, 2017) connected to this funded research.

Secondly, the paper presents the key findings from local stakeholders who completed the survey and discusses the implications for regional development and functional geographies. Thirdly, case studies are presented that offer insight into how constructive collaborative governance arrangements have emerged elsewhere to manage cross-border functional geographies at different scales that straddle jurisdictional boundaries. Fourthly, and finally, the paper critically reflects on the learning from the survey findings and case studies to inform a discussion on future directions and cross-border dynamics that should be considered for a post-Brexit landscape on the island of Ireland.

## SECTION 2: REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND FUNCTIONAL GEOGRAPHIES ON THE ISLAND OF IRELAND

Notions of regional development and functional geographies relate to scale. For example, in many regards, the all-island dimension can be considered a functional geography given the ‘de-bordering’ effects of EU and Single Market membership, the Common Travel Area (CTA) and the outworking of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. Much of which, according to de Mars, *et al.* (2018: 12) has standardised rules and regulations on either side of the Irish border. From a spatial planning perspective, there is an appreciation of the functional realities across social, economic, environmental, spatial and infrastructural relations on the island of Ireland. This awareness has been significantly bolstered by policy developments in recent years, including Northern Ireland’s *Regional Development Strategy* (RDS) and Ireland’s recent *National Planning Framework*, along with the joint departmental *Framework for Cooperation*, all seeking to encourage working together on issues that transcend (local and national) jurisdictional boundaries.

Regional development has tended to focus on reducing geographical disparities within, and across, jurisdictions through economic and infrastructure interventions. This has framed our understanding of what constitutes a functional geography, in terms of recognising it through economic flows or infrastructure connections/corridors. However, arguably, on the island of Ireland context, regional development has had a strong social dimension, recognising the need to address social inequalities and social well-being following the establishment of peace. In recent years, Western democracies have begun expanding their performance measures beyond Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as an indicator of a society’s standard of living to include well-being as a description of social progress, in terms of improvements in quality of life, material conditions and sustainability.

Regional development, and functions that operate across administrative boundaries, particularly across jurisdictional borders, requires a degree of dialogue and cooperation between many actors from different territories, levels and sectors. Recent research from ESPON’s ACTAREA project reveals how ‘soft’ territorial cooperation has grown to manage specific cross-border/cross-administrative opportunities and challenges, and to build strategic approaches to create mutual benefits. ESPON (2017: 2) defines soft territorial cooperation through various characteristics, which can consist of some of the following features:

- “Define the sectoral scope and geographical boundaries in an ‘open’ or ‘fuzzy’ way;
- Have a medium to long term integrative perspective (i.e. they are not limited to the implementation of a single project);
- Seek to enhance the capacities of involved players, making them actors of their own development; and
- Renew relations between institutional levels, sectors of activity and types of actors (e.g. NGOs, private companies, local and regional authorities, agencies, etc.)”.

Soft cooperation approaches or frameworks are designed to operate at the level of functional geographies, or areas, and are meant to complement, not be alternatives to, more formal ‘hard’ governmental structures that operate within jurisdictions. In many ways, the joint departmental *Framework for Cooperation* can be considered an expression of a ‘soft’ territorial cooperation framework (DRD and DoECLG, 2013). Furthermore, the cross-border working relationships between both Donegal County Council

and Derry City and Strabane District Council, and their co-designed *North West Strategic Growth Plan*, endorsed by both Governments during a North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) Plenary Meeting in July 2016, alongside their emerging *North West City Region Metropolitan Area Strategic Plan*, can be considered outputs from soft cross-border cooperation. These examples illustrate particular spatial (territorial), policy and institutional dimensions that contain various degrees, or scales, of governing ‘softness’. The content of these soft co-operations express shared strategic ambition to co-manage a particular functional geography, in this case the wider urban-rural relation in the North West of Ireland, and begins to formalise soft collaborative governance structures alongside existing statutory processes. Other characteristics that ESPON use to frame different dimensions and content of soft territorial cooperation are provided in Appendix 2.

The conceptualisation and operationalisation of soft cooperation models can help define, understand and coordinate functional geographies. The debate surrounding functional geographies is framed in understanding the ‘functionality’ of the interrelationship between people and place and the degree of cooperation between state and non-state actors across jurisdictions. Functional geographies can constitute social, economic and environmental inter-dependencies that occur beyond socially constructed administrative boundaries. Such functions can be understood to mean economic flows and connections (labour markets), the access to and provision of public services, commuting patterns, and the movement and social connections of people across particular geographies. For example, recent evidence from the All-Island Research Observatory (AIRO), published in *The Atlas of the Island of Ireland* (2015), illustrates how 14,800 persons regularly commute across the Irish border for either work or study. This data captures the emergence of a functional geography, particularly in the North West of the island, along the “Letterkenny-Derry/Londonderry corridor where more than 30% of all local workers in parts of the Inishowen peninsula work in Northern Ireland” (Gleeson, *et al*, 2015: 54).

Increasingly, in both academic and policy literature, there is a growing recognition that existing jurisdictional models of governance need to grapple with more ‘messy’ geographies that better reflect contemporary (inter-jurisdictional) interdependencies. On the island of Ireland, governing cross-border functional geographies has not been the exclusive responsibility of respective central or local government entities. In fact, these functional geographies have been supported by three cross-border networks, namely the East Border Region Ltd. (EBR), the Irish Central Border Area Network Ltd. (ICBAN), and the North West Region Cross-Border Group<sup>1</sup> (NWRCBG). These networks have been crucial meso-level cross-border governance instruments for aligning national (macro) level policy objectives with local (micro) level action – and have been accredited with making significant contributions to the increasing interactions between local government and civil society along the Irish border (see Creamer & O’Keeffe’s (2017) Issues Paper).

The backdrop presented above has allowed for the creation of collaborative working and cooperative instruments, particularly in the fields of spatial planning, energy, tourism, agri-food and health care. The challenges and consequences of Brexit, particularly along the Irish border, require immense thought, careful consideration and great creativity to not disrupt the delicate balance that currently exists across the island of Ireland, in what is its most peaceful period in modern history.

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<sup>1</sup> Following the reform of local government in Northern Ireland, this Group was reconstituted and renamed as the North West Regional Development Group (NWRDG).



### SECTION 3: POSSIBLE BREXIT IMPLICATIONS ON REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND FUNCTIONAL GEOGRAPHIES

Brexit presents challenges to the complex interdependencies that now uninterruptedly operate across the border. Both the emergence of cross-border functional geographies and cross-border regional development initiatives have been supported by deep economic and social cooperation on the island of Ireland, particularly in the years following the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. However, following the June 2016 referendum result in the UK, after many years of a global economic crisis, Brexit has generated febrile debate in the UK, Ireland and beyond about cross-border dynamics on the island of Ireland. While the Irish border was not prominent during early Brexit discussions, particularly prior to the referendum, the 310 mile/500km land border on the island of Ireland has come to dominate recent debates.

The outworking of the Brexit referendum is already having an effect on people living and working along the border. The survey respondents raised multiple concerns associated with Brexit's impact on the Irish border region across social, economic, policy, security and political aspects, even before the UK formally exits the EU in March 2019. The responses from key stakeholders engaged in this research indicate a broad range of issues and perceived implications, including:

- Policy divergence (e.g. trade regulations, environmental legislation, etc.);
- Severance /disruption to cross-border council collaboration;
- Disruption to service delivery arrangements;
- Economic and business impacts;
- Social mobility and 'everyday' movement of people;
- Reduced community cohesion/interaction; and
- Hardening of identity politics.

Many respondents highlighted emerging – and potential – social implications associated with Brexit. In particular, most respondents referred to the potential disruption to the social context along the Irish border, with one respondent stating Brexit could have *"implications for community connectivity and interaction. Border controls may result in social disorder, disobedience and a reintroduction to the black economy along the border"* (Public Admin RoI, #5). Given the uncertainty around border controls and infrastructure, there is increasing concern about the impact Brexit could have on social cohesion that has been nurtured over decades since the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. Other respondents indicate that much of the political commentary around Brexit is beginning to have a polarising effect at local community levels and may lead to the hardening of identity politics across the island. This presents an unsettling juncture to the positive journey that has been painstakingly nurtured on the island over recent decades, particularly the positive social progress that has allowed functional geographies and socio-economic relationships to emerge across the Irish border region.

Some respondents raised the potential impact of Brexit on the interrelationship between Derry city and its wider functional geography, which includes eastern parts of Donegal. Deep and complex relationships in the North West of the island of Ireland have emerged in recent decades, since the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, EU membership and with the removal of security infrastructure along the Irish border. One respondent noted the interdependency between labour markets and commuter patterns within this

functional geography, suggesting *“this makes the implications of Brexit for the NW region particularly stark compared to other parts of the border region”* (Private Sector NI, #1). Another key functional link is healthcare. There has been several significant cross-border and all-island initiatives in recent years. One respondent notes how *“it is crucial that we work together to maintain and further develop the solid working relationships that are now an everyday experience in the health services, North and South”* (Academic Sector NI, #2).

There is general consensus among survey respondents that functional geographies should continue to be identified and nurtured for economic, social and environmental benefits of citizens across the island of Ireland, as further illustrated in the following quotes:

*“The border region does experience higher cross-border economic linkages than areas further from the border. Barriers to this functional relationship would undermine the progress in cross-border trade established to date”* (Public Admin NI #4).

*“Functional areas, in terms of spatial planning, need to be the effective basis for producing spatial strategies. To enable long term capacity to respond to activities, flows and linkages it is essential that collaborations continue”* (Public Admin Rol, #2).

*“Co-operation always needs nurturing. In the world of planning, there is always the danger of failure to cooperate across boundaries”* (Public Admin NI, #5).

The task, though, lies in making this happen. Whilst the concept of a functional territory, as a geographical space, unrestricted by local government administrative boundaries, is generally accepted, inherent challenges exist, including, for example, who takes responsibility for actions, and making difficult decisions. One respondent (Public Admin Rol, #3) notes that *“it will take an extreme effort on both sides of the border to continue to nurture the existing collaborations”*.

Indeed, there are some concerns that reference to ‘functional (economic) geography’ can be used as a justification for creating combined authorities, which may not be universally desirable either within regions or on a cross-border basis given the strong sense of place, identity and belonging. However, some respondents argue that there is the need to convince both Irish and UK government officials that the design of soft governance arrangements must be *“fit for purpose”* and *“heavily connected to local government governance in order to work effectively on a place-based model”* (Private Sector NI, #1). Therefore, addressing such issues clearly requires both strategic support and local action. This requires leadership in the public sector, principally from central government in Belfast and Dublin to establish the ‘top-down’ strategic policy, financial resource, and legislative framework, often understood as more formal, ‘hard spaces’ of decision-making. In addition, ‘bottom-up’ initiatives, often referred to as ‘soft spaces’ for complementary collaborative activities, will link to maximising the activities across local economic development, community initiatives and public service delivery, such as healthcare and education, across administrative boundaries. Furthermore, as there are different ‘varieties’ of functional territory – the North West; the Eastern seaboard – each with a unique mix of development issues, innovative, bespoke arrangements are required in each region, or functional geographies, to reflect particular place-based

conditions. This is magnified further by multi-faceted political sensitivities within the Northern Ireland context.

Precisely what form of approach will be required to support functional geographies post-Brexit is unclear and indeed unpredictable at this time. Like experience from elsewhere, some respondents point to a mix of formal (statutory, 'hard') instruments alongside informal (local, more 'soft') approaches. As one respondent notes:

*"Formal statutory instruments can have value, however they should include the whole island rather than placing boundaries within the island to trade and co-operation. Informal approaches are currently in operation and should continue to be supported post-Brexit"* (Public Admin NI, #4).

While respondents acknowledge the need to increase collaboration on cross-border infrastructure and planning issues, within the context of Brexit, some stakeholders fear there is potential for divergence of regulatory environments; this is significant given the influence of regulation on policy and decision-making. Many respondents are concerned that policy divergence along the Irish border will *"represent disrupters to social, economic and political activity"* (Public Admin ROI, #5) and cause *"fragmented approaches to regional and local development"* (Academic Sector NI, #2). Reflecting on joint ventures recently developed in the health sector, particularly in collaborative cancer trails with a range of stakeholders on both sides of the border, one respondent candidly acknowledges that any *"divergence of policy and/or regulation could see such valuable collaborative endeavours end"* (Public Admin NI, #4). Therefore, pragmatic approaches are needed to sustain, and nurture new, collaborative inter-jurisdictional working. This may entail, for example, local memoranda of understanding (MoUs) or other local arrangements that are underpinned by or supported through statute. One respondent (Private Sector ROI, #1) proposed that the post of *'Minister for the Border Area'* be appointed by the Irish Government to demonstrate the importance of supporting development in the border zone post-Brexit.

There was an acknowledgement by some respondents of the value that 'softer', non-statutory governance arrangements can play in managing functional geographies and relationships across the border. One respondent (Academic Sector NI, #2) suggested that *"local authorities should have a duty to collaborate with each other"*, while another respondent (Public Admin ROI, #5) acknowledged the North West City Region Partnership as an emerging exemplar of good practice and argued that *"an opportunity exists to provide for a regional approach along the entire length of the border"*. In addition to local government playing a key role in nurturing cross-border collaboration, a civil society respondent (Civil Society ROI, #2) stressed the important role existing cross-border regional bodies, such as NWRCBG, ICBAN and EBR, currently play and will continue to play post-Brexit.

The survey respondents raised relevant points about how regional/local planning policy and practice post-Brexit help promote functional geographies. Many respondents acknowledged that operational frameworks and practices are already in place, such as the National Planning Framework and the North West Strategic Growth Partnership. The following quote captures this point:

*"The North West initiatives to date indicate that effective collaborations have occurred at a local level with the support and buy-in from government. This*

*has influenced and helped shape the approach to the North West within the NPF and will also inform the RSES being developed at the regional level” (Public Admin Rol, #2).*

Much of the existing good practice has been built on cross-border communication, collaboration and strong working relationships that has emerged over recent decades. As one respondent argues, *“the most important determinant of suitable policies and practices will come down to the quality of the relationships between key individuals and their staff with their partner local authorities”* (Civil Society Rol, #2). However, the existing collaborative (‘soft’) arrangements need to be properly resourced for whatever challenges arise post-Brexit. Many respondents noted that such resourcing should include leadership at local, regional and national levels to continue to drive cross-border collaborations and to co-design innovative initiatives that embed resilience to respond to the (uncertain) impacts of Brexit. One respondent captures how the recent reforms both in Ireland and Northern Ireland offer opportunities for further cross-border policy (and plan) alignment and integration, particularly now that local authorities in both jurisdictions have similar spatial (land use) planning powers, as well as similar arrangements for coordinating enhanced service delivery (through ‘community planning’ powers). The respondent argues that there should be:

*“alignment and integration (where possible) of local development plans and planning policies will assist with promotion of functional geographies - local and central government should collaborate on this issue” (Public Admin NI, #1).*

In addition to aligning the instruments of planning operating in local authorities on either side of the Irish border, some respondents underscored the need to *“develop mechanisms to facilitate civil society and lay public engagement/co-development in cross-border planning/environmental issues”* (Academic Sector Rol, #1). Energising and empowering local people to get involved in co-producing future cross-border initiatives will be crucial to create the social capital and infrastructure necessary to respond to place-based challenges from Brexit. Perhaps now is an opportune time to consider the development of more sophisticated cross-border civil society networks, which could be embedded into, or, at the very least, complement existing civil society infrastructure such as Public Participation Networks (in Ireland) and other participatory structures used by local authorities in Northern Ireland. Focusing on more local approaches to cross-border development aligns with current ideas associated with ‘place-based’ thinking and leadership. Central to this approach is (local) state actors working in direct partnership with a range of (local) people in one given location (what could be a ‘functional geography’) to co-produce specific, integrated and place tailored interventions (Iriss, 2015).

The findings from the survey indicate that across all respondents, the overwhelming sense is one of huge uncertainty, which presents additional challenges to the cross-border region with an existing legacy of conflict, underdevelopment and regional inequalities. The evidence suggests functional geographies need to be better appreciated, nurtured and resourced along the Irish border to offer some resilience to any negative outcomes emerging from Brexit.

## SECTION 4: LEARNING FROM ELSEWHERE

As noted above, anticipating the outcome of current Brexit negotiations is problematic given the differences in position on future arrangements at the Irish Border. Generally, whilst functional geographies do exist outside of the EU, the rationale for selecting case studies for this position paper was based on identifying cross-border examples involving EU and non-EU member states. This section provides examples of other EU member states collaborating in regional development and functional geographies with non-EU member states. In presenting the case studies, the following section provides a description of the case study context and then discusses aspects of soft cooperation and collaborative structures to draw out the potential relevance to cross-border working between Ireland and Northern Ireland post-Brexit. The two cases below, while two distinct examples, operate across the same cross-border geography, which involves France, Germany and Switzerland. Furthermore, the case studies are also distinctive in terms of the spatial scale at which each operates<sup>2</sup>. This is useful in the island of Ireland context given the varying functional relationships that exist, for example at a strategic level in the North West between Derry City and Strabane District and Donegal County Council, and a more local level between cross-border settlements such as Lifford-Strabane and Blacklion-Belcoo.

### Case Study 1: Macro Scale – Basel Trinational Eurodistrict

Extending across the French, German and Swiss borders, covering an area of nearly 2,000 km<sup>2</sup> and comprising a population of almost 900,000 this functional territory is described as a “shared living space”. The territory is significantly interdependent across the constituent parts, with an estimated 50,000 people commuting daily across national borders. Whilst an economically and socially dynamic urban core is a dominant feature, parts of the territory are rural. Cross-border cooperation in Basel has a long history, emerging from the coordination of economic development in the Upper Rhine region during the 1960s. This has morphed over time through ‘soft’ (sharing of information; joint conferences) and ‘hard’ (transport infrastructure) collaborative initiatives. For example, a cross-border extension to the existing tram network opened in 2017 linking French, German and Swiss parts of the territory. Though not unique globally in terms of a local transport system that crosses a border, it is currently the only tri-national system and is a further practical demonstration of the close collaboration that exists in Basel and the wider region.

- *Areas of cooperation*  
Extensive range of projects (including the local scale projects, case study two below) linked to regeneration, regional transport, local transport, economic development and management of landscape and open spaces.
- *Structures of cooperation*  
A two-pronged approach to cooperation exist in Basel. First are the formal and informal processes, which in turn are “driven by projects that concretise the high level of spatial planning cooperation that has evolved over the years”.

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this report, the two examples are differentiated by ‘macro’ and ‘local’.

- *Relevance to post-Brexit island of Ireland*

The Basel Trinational Eurodistrict is an example of lateral spatial collaboration (see: *Issues Paper Regional Development: Recognising Functional Territories/Geographies*) that work with and in 'fuzzy boundaries' relating to mutual thematic policy areas, and is operationalised by formal and informal spaces that enables stakeholders to negotiate, conceive and manage co-designed solutions for place-based functional geographies. Responses to this study affirm that this approach, which already exists on the island of Ireland, will be essential for future social, environmental and economic well-being particularly in the border region.

## **Case Study 2: Local Scale – “3 Lands”**

The *3 Lands* initiative is a spatial planning agreement to co-manage a functional geography that straddles three jurisdictional territories across Europe: Germany and France, both within the European Union, and Switzerland, which is not a member of the European Union, Customs Union and the European Economic Area, but which is part of the European Free Trade Association. The membership portfolio is relevant to the island of Ireland context, given the current thinking by the UK on its proposed membership position post-Brexit.

The particular geographical area of this initiative is a new urban space, which lies at a key point between Basel-Nord and the extensive nature and landscape areas in the Sundgau, the Rhine meadows and the Wiesetal. The tri-national spatial plan captures a common geographical and spatial identity, chiefly along the banks of the Rhine, across three jurisdictional borders, between the Dreirosenbrücke Bridge and the Palmrain Bridge, and aims to regenerate former industrial and harbour areas (see Appendix 3).

The Planning Agreement (PLANUNGSVEREINBARUNG 2016 - 2017/20) recognises the spatial and functional relationships across social, economic and environmental assets in this tri-national space. In particular, the conceptual vision for this area concentrates on leisure and recreation connections, physical urban and transport infrastructure, and economic flows that position this urban area within a wider functional geography.

The agreement commenced in January 2016 and will be in operation to 31 December 2020, with financial arrangements being negotiated on an annual basis. The supporting project structures can be considered an example of 'soft' cooperation to manage the functional geography that straddles three jurisdictions. The project involves a range of political, public administration and organisational project partners including:

- Canton of Basel-Stadt (Switzerland);
- City of Huningue (France);
- City of Weil am Rhein (Germany);
- Community of Agglomeration of the Three Borders (referred to as CA3F);
- Department of Haut-Rhin (France);
- Lörrach Landkreis (Germany);
- City of Saint-Louis (France);
- Basel Trinational Eurodistrict (ETB); and
- IBA Basel 2020.

There are designated representatives from each project partner involved in the various organisational structures that comprise *3 Lands* (Appendix 4) to ensure inclusive participation and joint ownership. The organisational structure consists of:

- A Political Steering Committee (PS);
- A Global Steering Group of the project (GPS);
- A Global Project Management Group (LPG);
- A Working Group 1 (WG1): Bridges / mobility /economic feasibility;
- A Working Group 2 (WG2): Open spaces /initial usages; and
- A Communications Working Group

The Political Steering (PS) Committee guides the political-strategic level of the project and meets approximately three times a year. The main purpose for this functional geography governance tier is to decide on the project alignment and overall financing across partnering administrative structures. In addition, it ensures the anchoring of the *3 Lands* project in the tri-national politics. The Global Steering Group of the project (GPS) oversees the strategic administrative components of *3 Lands*, coordinating operations across the various municipalities and partnering organisations. It is the conduit between the Political Steering (PS) and the Global Project Management Group (LPG). The LPG coordinates and manages the various technical operations across the different partners, directing the specific thematic working groups.

The development of *3 Lands* represents a constructive functional geography governance model between partnering countries to develop a shared vision and co-designed solutions to coordinate national and binational planning projects.

These case studies illustrate how both ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ cooperation can operate across EU and non-EU member states.

## SECTION 5: FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND POST-BREXIT CROSS-BORDER CONSIDERATIONS

It should be acknowledged that the adoption of ‘soft’ cooperation solutions to support functional geographies, such as any emerging post-Brexit to manage cross-border relations, has grown out of a long shared history, much of which has been operationalised – and supported – by being EU member states and being in the Customs Union. The continuation of nurturing appropriate cross-border regional development is highly dependent on respective governance models and regulatory frameworks that emerge post-Brexit, on either side of the Irish border.

Prior to the Brexit Referendum, *The Framework for Cooperation – Spatial Strategies of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland* (DRD & DEHLG, 2013) was co-created by two government departments, offering bilateral support and commitment for cooperation. The significance of this inter-jurisdictional strategic planning framework is that it highlights the operational realities of facilitating cross-border planning and governance between Ireland and Northern Ireland. It asserts a joint commitment to securing a cooperative approach between the two states through a non-statutory framework. This framework provides the overarching architecture for supporting regional development across Irish border functional geographies. In many ways, this framework is even more significant in a post-referendum, post-Brexit landscape, as it frames a partnership approach based on the principles of ‘subsidiarity’ and pragmatism, which are consistent with the EU’s Cohesion Policy.

In parallel, as highlighted by many survey respondents, the recent local government reforms in Ireland and Northern Ireland have created complementary local governance architecture to enhance ‘soft’ cooperation to support functional relations. The suite of powers and responsibilities of local authorities have reached a degree of convergence, and perhaps, with the possible implications of Brexit, it is time to further capitalise on this unique governance convergence to better coordinate shared responses to common cross-border challenges. In particular, there are specific local planning regimes that offer opportunities for strong alliances and ever-greater integrative perspectives. One such instrument is spatial planning, with local authorities now having responsibility for local development (forward) planning. This function offers the potential for more spatial alignment across border council areas on place-making, which goes beyond traditional land use planning to bring together and integrate policies and plans to co-create visions to manage and influence spatial change. An emerging local example is Mid-Ulster Council in Northern Ireland exploring the use of ‘Statements of Common Ground’ to promote a common understanding and agenda on socio-spatial issues that go beyond the Council’s administrative boundary into Monaghan.

In recent years, another planning instrument has emerged in both jurisdictions that tries to better coordinate integrated service delivery. In Northern Ireland, this is expressed as ‘Community Planning’, while in Ireland, it is understood as ‘Local Economic and Community Planning’. While not structurally identical, both operate to improve the co-design and co-delivery of public services for enhancing social, economic and environmental wellbeing. In effect, both of these new planning instruments are concerned with place-shaping, as the design and delivery of services and community infrastructure are increasingly place-based, and because of their particular spatial or geographical operation, their outcomes will shape the dynamics of places.



Both of these complementary planning regimes, supported by the overarching *Framework for Cooperation*, deal with, and manage, socio-spatial change, and have the potential to adopt further bespoke place-based thinking and practices that facilitate greater policy integration and cross-border collaboration, particularly given how local authorities in each jurisdiction have similar planning instruments since 2015. Enhancing place-based thinking, arguably, requires shifting from a policy-driven perspective, which tends to be derived from central government, to place-based working, which tries to better explore complex ‘whole systems’ issues that emerge in particular localities – some of which may be the result of policy-driven thinking. Adopting place-based thinking and practices align with the shift towards the importance of improving and measuring wellbeing. It is in *place* – ‘the local’ – where people experience positive or negative social, economic and environmental wellbeing. As Menzies (2016, no page) argues:

*“While policies at jurisdictional levels are important for these factors, individual wellbeing is also shaped at a very localised level. ... Where we live – the very streets and neighbourhoods – matter and have an impact on our wellbeing.”*

While EU membership has positively changed the dynamic of relations between Northern Ireland (and the wider UK) and Ireland, the now well-established institutional ‘thickness’ and professional working occurring across the Irish border provides a strong foundation on which to re-conceptualise and re-operationalise fresh governance instruments to continue to support existing – and emerging – functional geographies. Strengthening the alignment of planning instruments operating across the border offer potential for further *integration*, in bringing coherence to similar, yet jurisdictionally different, policy landscapes, and *collaboration*, in promoting greater inclusivity and participation with other state, civil and private actors within, and beyond, administrative boundaries. While many view these planning regimes operating through formal, statutory mechanisms (‘hard spaces’), there is increasingly practical experimentation, and academic research, to illustrate new informal, voluntary forms of governance (‘soft spaces’) for offering alternative, yet complementary, ways for collaborative working, co-designing policy and delivering joint action.

It is against this background that new collaborative structures have emerged. For example, the *North West Strategic Growth Partnership*, which has been co-designed and co-implemented by Donegal County Council and Derry City and Strabane District Council to facilitate and resource the growth of the North West City Region. In recognising the functional relations across council – and jurisdictional – boundaries, the partnership has agreed to collaborate on three regional development pillars (Regional Economic Growth and Investment; Regional Physical and Environmental Development; and Regional Social and Community Cohesion and Well-Being) by promoting a cohesive approach to the North West and mobilising a range of resources to support work programmes through soft governance cooperation. Appreciating the uncertainty posed by Brexit, both councils (Donegal County Council and Derry City and Strabane District Council) undertook an initial scoping study, which produced a joint report that acknowledges the value of taking a collaborative approach, as a model for managing functional geographies, for driving effective regional development. In particular, the response praises the Irish Government’s commitment to this new partnership, particularly in light of Brexit, stating:

*“...while the arrangements in the North West represent the next stage in a process of developing a cross-border regional growth agenda, it is useful to note that this participation by the Irish Government (on a cross-departmental basis and supported in person by key personnel from specific Departments*

*including DPER and Department of An Taoiseach [Assistant Secretary level]], forms part of a cross-governmental co-ordinated approach to managing the impact of Brexit” (Ulster University Economic Policy Centre, 2017: 2).*

The functional relations across the educational sector in North West Ireland has recently been acknowledged in a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Ulster University, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, North West Regional College, and Donegal Education and Training Board. Coming into effect on 23 February 2018, and operating for five years, the purpose of the MoU (Ulster University, *et al.*, 2018: 3) between the different academic institutions is to:

*“...further develop and consolidate existing collaboration between the institutions which cements the civic and economic role of these four institutions within the context of the emerging Regional Growth model for the North West City Region. The MOU represents an articulation of the role of its partners as anchors for growth within the North West City Region place-based leadership model, which is driving a long-term and ambitious agenda for the region with global, national and regional reach and impact. Additionally, the MOU provides a mechanism for both governments to engage with the institutions to deliver on our shared further and higher educational ambitions and commitments.”*

These local examples highlight an increasing appetite for constructing ‘soft’ cooperation models for continuing productive collaboration post-Brexit.

## SECTION 6: CONCLUSION

While Brexit presents uncertainties for cross-border relations, particularly for the economic forecast, not just along the border, but also across the island of Ireland, the establishment of soft cooperation models offer a degree of structural resilience to navigate actors to continue to nurture positive working relationships.

The evidence emerging from this research, particularly exhibited in the survey responses and in the case study learning, indicates a need to more carefully consider the nurturing of soft cooperation models to co-manage functional geographies that have emerged across what has been an invisible Irish border. The survey respondents overwhelmingly supported the idea of positioning 'functional geographies' as a way to frame future discussions, and to consider these geographies as a way to design new soft cooperation models, post-Brexit. The majority of respondents acknowledged the need for both formal statutory ('hard') and informal complementary ('soft') governance arrangements/approaches to negotiate future coordination of common functional links, such as spatial planning, transport and infrastructure, tourism, healthcare, and economic and business cooperation.

Recent reforms in Ireland and Northern Ireland have created emerging opportunities for greater policy and practice convergence to support both 'hard' and 'soft' cooperation, particularly given the uncertainties presented by Brexit. The current policy landscape and similar governance structures appear robust to support cross-border functional relations, and offers some resilience to the potential implications of Brexit, particularly with the absence of a functioning Assembly in Northern Ireland. Recent examples of new institutional entities, such as the North West City Region Growth Partnership, have initiated 'soft' cooperation to coordinate shared socio-economic and spatial challenges. In doing so, they have empowered key governance players across the two jurisdictions to capitalise on converging interests across many sectors, not purely spatial planning.

Different scales need to be carefully considered for various sectoral aspects of functional geographies that operate across the Irish border. Various sectors, such as energy, health and higher education, may require a national/regional 'soft' cooperative structures to provide cross-border strategic coordination. In complementing the more formal, internal statutory-based arrangements, the 'softer' governance frameworks should allow for actors to build medium-to-long term integrative perspectives and solutions to cross-border working.

While the *Framework for Cooperation* provides the overarching construct to nurture functional cross-border structures and relationships, active participation by national, regional and local actors is needed to move away from reactive approaches to more proactive ones. The quality of the relationships among actors to create collective capacity will be crucial for avoiding (a return to) 'back-to-back' planning, particularly post-Brexit. Building and sustaining these relationships provide the necessary foundation for creating flexible, but effective, 'soft' governance structures that can deliver pragmatic outcomes by mobilising ideas, resources and actions.

Learning from ESPON ACTAREA indicates that current thinking and practice on functional geographies positions 'soft' governance cooperation and coordination as the necessary approach to add value to 'hard',

formal structures. These 'soft' cooperation approaches offer the prospect to more meaningfully consider and potentially improve social, economic and environmental wellbeing outcomes, which tend to be neglected at the 'edges' of jurisdictional boundaries, because of their spatial/geographical peripherality. The importance of these 'softer' approaches should not be ignored, or purely viewed as alternatives, but as mechanisms that complement existing structures.

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## Appendix 1: Questionnaire Respondents

### Northern Ireland (9 respondents)

Public Admin NI #1	Local Government Representative
Public Admin NI #2	Local Government Representative
Public Admin NI #3	Local Government Representative
Public Admin NI #4	Central Government Representative
Public Admin NI #5	Local Government Representative
Public Admin NI #6	NGO
Private Sector NI #1	Border Development Consultancy
Academic Sector NI #1	Research Centre
Academic Sector NI #2	University

### Republic of Ireland (13 respondents)

Public Admin RoI #1	Local Government Representative
Public Admin RoI #2	Local Government Representative
Public Admin RoI #3	Local Government Representative
Public Admin RoI #4	Regional Government Representative
Public Admin RoI #5	Local Government Representative
Public Admin RoI #6	Local Government Representative
Private Sector RoI #1	Sectoral Representative Body
Private Sector RoI #2	Not Identified
Private Sector RoI #3	Sectoral Representative Body
Private Sector RoI #4	Consultant
Civil Society RoI #1	Community Network
Civil Society RoI #2	Social Justice Agency
Academic Sector RoI #1	Research Centre

*Please note that two survey responses were incomplete and did not specify a sector affiliation.*

## Appendix 2:

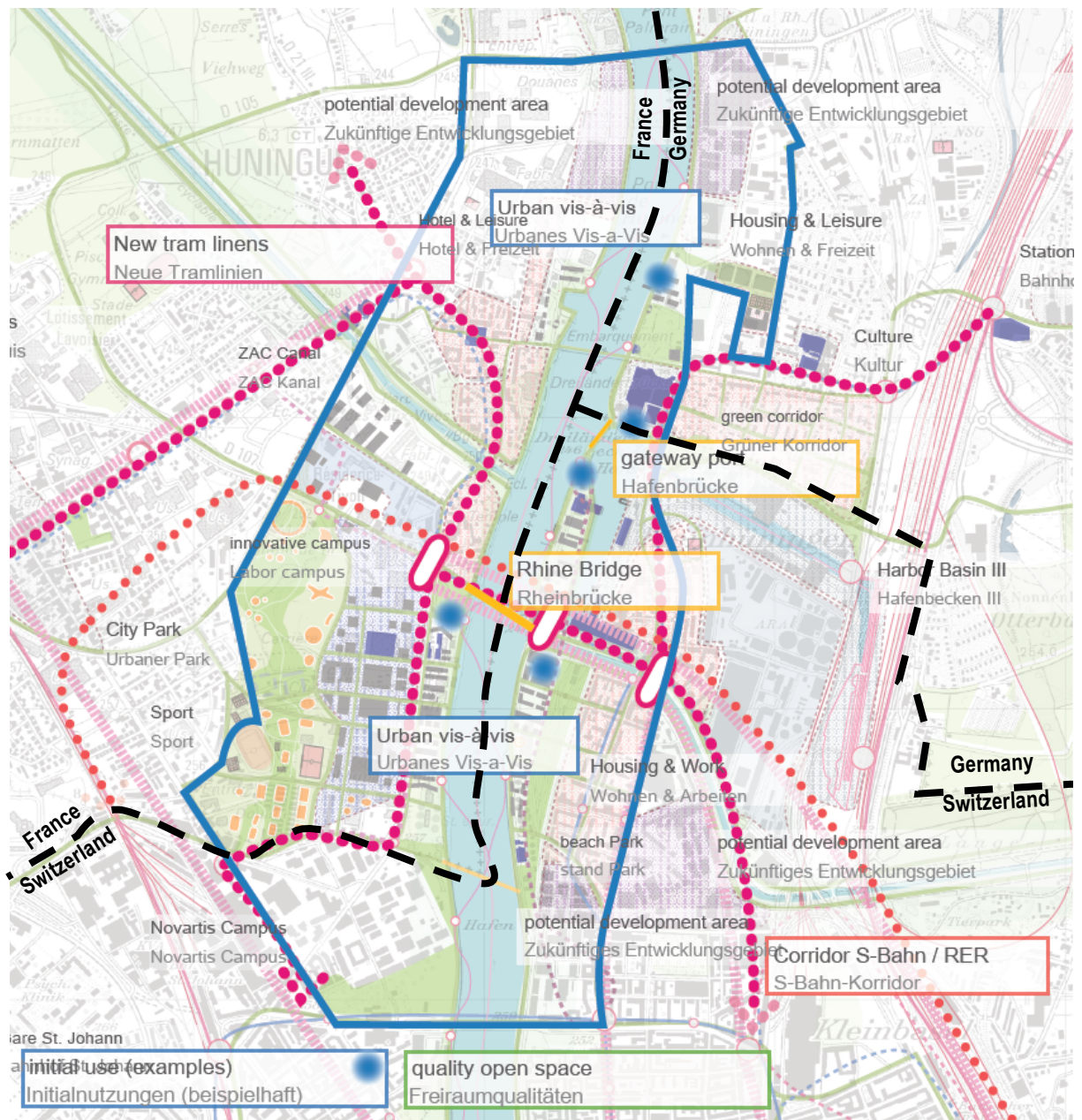
### Dimensions of soft territorial cooperation and their potential characteristics

Dimension	Content	Values					
		1	2	3	4	5	6
<b>policy dimension</b>	<b>strategic ambition</b>	implementation of one concrete project	implementation of several projects	project development and/ or spatial planning	strategy concretisation	strategy development, agenda setting	governance development
<b>institutional dimension</b>	<b>degree and type of formalisation</b>	platform without structures, due to little political efforts	combination of existing structures ('pooled structures')	mainly combination of existing structures with some joint elements (executive committee etc.)	mainly joint elements (supra-structures) with still considerable influence of pooled elements	distinct, comprehensive structures (supra structures)	platform with intentionally maximal openness
<b>instrumental dimension</b>	<b>resources</b>	No own resources	small own budgets / discursive instruments	solid budgets / effective discursive instruments	budgets and some juridical instruments, effective discursive instruments	solid own financial, discursive and juridical resources	strategic combination of all kinds of instruments in the multi-level system
<b>territorial dimension</b>	<b>territorial coverage / geographical scale</b>	little spatial references	combination of existing territories without new label (pooled territory)	combination of existing territories with new label	supra-territory	soft spaces, fuzzy boundaries without intentional meaning	soft space, fuzzy boundaries - defining spatial focus as intentional part of process
<b>temporal dimension</b>	<b>timeframe / historicity / continuity</b>	just happening, no timeframe foreseen	short-term, fix timeframe	medium term, fix timeframe	Long term, fixed timeframe	long-term, continuity foreseen	long term, open-ended, flexible for termination
<b>participatory dimension</b>	<b>levels and actors</b>	just technical issues, few actors	single level/ purely public / domestic; few actors	several actors, at least one of the following features: multi-level, cross-border, public& non public	at least two of the following features: multi-level, cross-border, public& non public	multi-level, cross-border, public& non public	not defined, open for multilevel, cross-border, non-public
<b>activity dimension</b>	<b>areas of intervention</b>	only one sector involved (e.g. transport, environment)	more than one sector involved	more than one sector, spatial development	spatial development, some references to spatial planning	strategic spatial development and / or planning	multi-sectoral, integrated; ambitions with regard to modify territorial governance
	<b>kind of activities</b>	unclear	data & monitoring	discursive processes	influence on budgets	planning	strategic spatial development

(Source: ESPON ACTAREA, 2017).



## Appendix 3

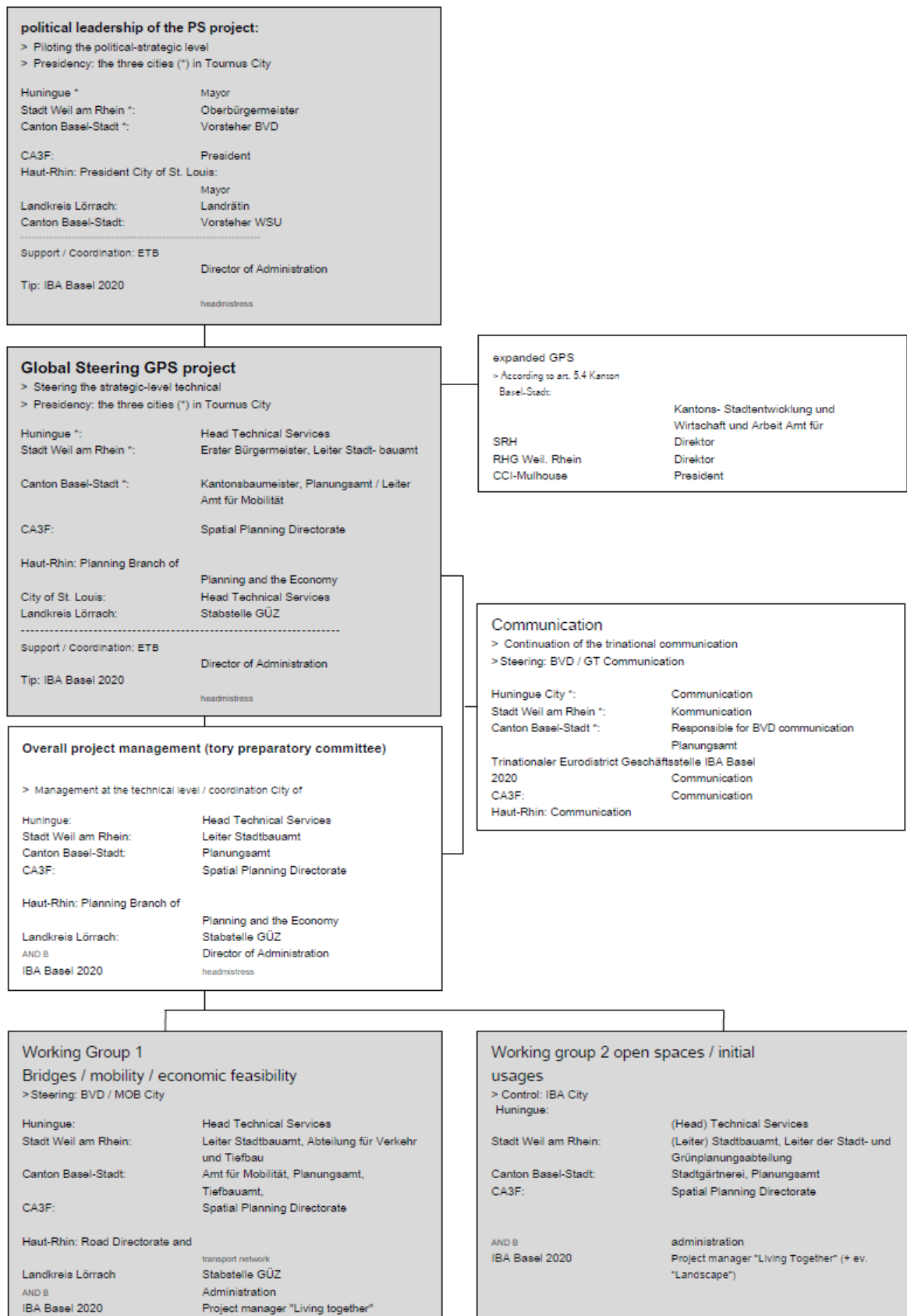


(Source: Adapted from 3Land PLANUNGSVEREINBARUNG 2016-2017/20 (Planning Convention 2016-2017/20), 2016)

## Appendix 4

Organizational 3land detailed 2016-2020

Planning 2016-2020 Convention: Appendix 1





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**ISBN Number: 978-1-906879-23-5**

