

Implications of Brexit for the life, witness and mission of churches in the UK

An internal briefing paper for church leaders from the [Joint Public Issues Team](#) (Methodist Church in Britain, United Reformed Church, Church of Scotland, Baptist Union of Great Britain), 23 December 2020

The Brexit transition period ends on 31 December 2020. The UK constitutionally left the European Union on 31 January 2020, but remained part of the EU's Customs Union and Single Market during the transition period, meaning most practical arrangements did not change. From 1 January 2021, new arrangements will come into place that will have far-reaching consequences for our common life – especially as, at the time of writing, there has been no agreement on the UK's future relationship with the EU.

This paper seeks to inform those in local and national church leadership about issues that might have a particular impact on communities, congregations and wider society. It is primarily intended as an internal briefing rather than for general circulation or public dissemination.

Food and farming

At the time of writing, a new trading arrangement between the UK and EU has yet to be agreed. The basics of any deal are largely understood, however the detailed implications, especially around fishing rights and quotas, are still subject to negotiation. If there is no agreement in place with the EU when the transition period expires, there are likely to be significant short-term effects, mainly caused by greater uncertainty and vastly increased friction at borders.

Short term: The UK imports 26% its food from the EU and a further 20% of food from the rest of the world under EU regulations and agreements. The introduction of new procedures at the border including new documentation, enforcement and IT systems will mean increased processing times and uncertainty, compounded by additional Covid-related public health measures being in place. It is likely that some food suppliers will experience difficulties. The industry has stated that it is confident that sufficient food will enter the UK after the transition period ends, but it is possible that variety and choice may be reduced.

Longer term: As new trade agreements are negotiated, there is a balance to be struck between ensuring a supply of cheap food, possibly produced in places with lower environmental and animal welfare standards than the UK, with the objective of having a thriving high welfare and environmentally sustainable farming sector in the UK. The policy levers that determine this balance are quotas, tariffs, standards and farm subsidies, but they will not be finalised for some time. Organisations such as the National Farmers' Union and the Food Foundation are warning that current proposals could create major difficulties in food production and supply. This uncertainty, coupled with the increased administration costs to both importers and exporters, implies either increased food prices and/or increased pressure on farmers.

By international standards, the UK currently has very cheap food (only in the US and Singapore is a lower proportion of household income spent on food). Despite this, there has been a huge rise in people experiencing hunger and food insecurity, a situation that has been exacerbated by Covid-19. High food prices are not a driver of today's poverty, but increasing food prices would hit lower income families hardest and worsen an already problematic situation. This is likely to add to demand on foodbanks, at debt advice centres, and on other support services for those in poverty.

Economics and trade

Brexit exchanges easy zero-tariff trade with the UK's biggest trading partner, the EU, for the freedom to make trade deals and regulations unilaterally. This brings both economic costs and potential benefits. The costs include the loss of former trade deals negotiated via the EU, many but not all of which have been replicated so existing relationships can carry over. These costs can be partially reduced by a trade deal with the EU, but will be felt immediately on 1st January or shortly thereafter. Benefits will require hard work and successful international negotiation, and will take time to develop. The winners and losers from such deals are as yet unknown and depend on the government's negotiating priorities, and will therefore largely be politically determined.

Without knowing what future trade agreements may bring, which EU or UK regulations will be altered over the coming months, and what tariffs will apply, it is hard to assess the full costs and benefits of this. However, the widespread view of economists is that business costs will rise and the economy's growth will be slowed, on top of the impact of Covid-19.

In local communities this is likely to be experienced slowly over the coming months and years, with data suggesting it is the poorest regions of the UK that will experience the negative effects first. It will be felt in increased prices for consumers for certain products and services. The effect on individual businesses will vary greatly depending on their relationship with international trade. Some will be boosted, but others may shrink or close, with resulting job losses. While legal, IT and administrative businesses which support importers and exporters will see additional demand, those who buy inputs from the EU and those that sell to the EU (often the same firms) will be heavily impacted. These sectors include clothes and textiles, car and machinery manufacturing, pharmaceuticals and finance. Communities which rely heavily on particularly impacted business sectors will be especially badly affected.

Migration

The conflated issues of asylum and migration became central to the Brexit referendum. The campaign prompted an upsurge in hostility towards migrants. For many, a key reason to vote for Brexit was the promise that Britain would have greater control over its borders.

The ending of the transition period means an end to the free movement of EU citizens in the UK and UK citizens in the EU. EU citizens who wish to remain living in the UK need to have applied for a new immigration status, referred to as EU Settled Status, by the 30th June 2021. It may be more difficult for some more vulnerable EU citizens to apply for this scheme: people may not realise they need to apply, or may lack the necessary documentation or online access. Our Churches have produced a [booklet](#) aimed at church leaders and those who work in the community which signposts some of the available support and outlines the process of application.

A new points-based immigration scheme comes into place on 1 January 2021. It is designed to meet the dual aims of ensuring that the UK has the workforce it needs while reducing overall immigration numbers. It is not clear if it can achieve those aims or even if those aims can be made compatible. Much depends on the implementation and interpretation of the new laws. The Home Office however has not had a good track record of demonstrating fair and efficient treatment, and in November 2020 it was held in breach of the Equality Act for the way it operates its ["Hostile Environment" policy](#).

Church leaders, especially in ethnically diverse areas, may find people in their community affected by the new systems and in need of pastoral or practical support as they seek to navigate their way through them.

One particular implication of the new immigration system will be that links between people in different European nations will become more difficult and expensive. For example, some UK Churches have had partnership arrangements with other Churches in the EU which have included an exchange programme, where a minister might have come to serve here for 12 or 18 months. If this were to happen from 2021, the additional costs of a visa and the health surcharge for the minister and every member of his or her family coming with them could make such exchange programmes prohibitively expensive.

Asylum

The obligation to offer sanctuary to those fleeing persecution is set in International Law and remains both a moral and legal duty after Brexit. How the UK exercises that duty will however change.

The EU's Dublin regulations set out rules as to how asylum seekers are dealt with throughout the EU. Importantly it governs which country has responsibility for assessing asylum claims, and preventing multiple applications in multiple countries. These rules will no longer apply in the UK, and nor will the arrangements for information sharing or returning asylum seekers to other EU countries.

The Home Office is attempting to broker bilateral deals to replace these arrangements, but as yet without success. The government has put in place regulations to remove asylum seekers to “safe countries” without assessment of their claims. However, without arrangements to ensure “safe countries” accept such asylum seekers, these rules will only serve to add further complexity and delay to an already slow and complex system.

There remains some uncertainty about how the UK Government will continue to support the rights of asylum seekers who have a family member in the UK and can claim eligibility on grounds of family reunification. It has also not put in place mechanisms to provide safe and legal routes for unaccompanied child refugees to resettle in the UK from different EU countries.

Sovereignty

A key aim of the Brexit process was to “restore sovereignty” or “take back control”. There is now a question about best to exercise that sovereignty. Issues about how much of that power should reside in Westminster and how much in the devolved administrations is live, and feeds into already simmering tensions.

It is also increasingly clear is that sovereignty is not absolute. Nations by choice and necessity are interdependent, therefore managing that interdependence requires a pooling of sovereignty. Trade deals, immigration agreements and international security arrangements all require the UK to give up some of its autonomy in return for the benefits of co-operation.

Christians believe in the primary sovereignty of Jesus Christ. We owe our first loyalty to following him as our Lord; scripture acknowledges that discipleship can be hard and that we may be asked to lay aside all other priorities. At a time when commentators and politicians are speaking about the importance of the UK’s sovereignty, church leaders have a role in reminding congregations that our first loyalty should be to the kingdom of God.

Devolution

Scotland did not vote for Brexit, and was the only nation of the UK where both its government and the majority of its population agreed on the issue in 2016 referendum. Polling indicates that the Brexit process has reinforced these views. The current devolution settlement could not prevent enormous constitutional changes being forced upon the people of Scotland against their will. Questions of power and sovereignty in Scotland are an inevitable consequence.

While Wales’s government did not support Brexit, a majority of its people did, making the issue more complex. However both Scottish and Welsh governments have been unhappy at the lack of consultation during the Brexit process and with the redistribution of powers formerly held by the EU.

Brexit is often seen from outside England as an English project, driven by a worldview that does not value the different national identities within the UK. The large size of England combined with the current political structure does not require the UK government to take those other national identities into account. There are questions as to whether that is sustainable, and in Scotland at least, there are now consistent opinion poll majorities for independence.

Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK with a land border with the EU and as such is being treated very differently from the rest of the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland will remain largely within the EU Single Market and Customs Union, which will allow goods to flow freely across the Ireland/Northern Ireland border. However, Northern Ireland will be subject to EU rules over which neither UK nor NI leaders have any say.

The Irish Sea will become the effective border between the EU Single Market and the rest of the UK, so goods going to and from Great Britain and Northern Ireland will be subject to customs procedures. In the short-term, food supplies are protected by 3 and 6 month ‘run on’ arrangements for the supermarkets. In

the medium term, the EU and UK must agree what goods need to be checked and what paperwork is required by importers and exporters between NI and GB.

Since its creation in 1921, Northern Ireland suffered from sporadic and sometimes sustained violence until 1997, when a peace deal was negotiated. The Good Friday Agreement rests on the principle of equal and mutual respect for those who identify as Irish and those identifying as British. The supremacy of EU law in matters of human rights was a key plank in guaranteeing that. The tightly negotiated balance between the aspirations of those with Irish and those with British identities living in Northern Ireland has been upended by Brexit – which the Northern Irish themselves voted against. This gives grounds for concern, but much depends on how the arrangements for customs are implemented, how visible the divide down the Irish Sea becomes, and on the UK and NI governments’ commitment to visibly and impartially ensuring equal rights.

Relationships with European Churches

Leaders of UK Churches [wrote to European Churches](#) in January 2020, assuring them of how greatly their love and friendship were valued, and that these relationships would continue beyond Brexit. UK Churches continue to play an active role in European Church life, including through participation in ecumenical bodies such as the Conference of European Churches, the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe, Eurodiaconia, the Churches’ Commission for Migrants in Europe, and denomination/confessional groups.

These bodies were created to facilitate dialogue and fellowship, relationship and community that transcends national, cultural or linguistic differences in a common commitment to loving service in the world. While the context for these relationships will change as the Brexit transition period ends, churches in the UK will want to continue to collaborate with European partners around issues of common concern.

A prayer as the Brexit transition period ends

God of all

At this moment of change
we pray for our country,
 our neighbours,
 and for your kingdom to come.

Where there are new freedoms,
 may they be used with wisdom and compassion

Where there are new barriers,
 may we not forget those on the other side

Where there are new challenges,
 may we seek your strength

Where there is discord and hurt,
 may you enable healing and reconciliation.

We pray for all
 who face uncertainty or anxiety at this time,
for those whose lives and livelihoods will change.

Confirm in us your eternal call
 to act justly, love mercifully
 and walk humbly with you.

Amen

See also: [How can Christians best pray for Brexit? \(premierchristian.news\)](#)

Questions or requests for further work should be addressed to enquiries@jointpublicissues.org.uk