



# Beyond Brexit:

Public perspectives on the future UK-EU relationship

## Common Ground

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Common Ground is a project co-funded by the European Union delivered in partnership by Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini, the3million and British Future, exploring the future UK-EU political relationship and supporting communities of EU citizens in the UK to thrive. The research component of the project has been carried out by British Future, an independent, non-partisan thinktank which works to build a stronger consensus around issues of immigration, integration, identity and race.

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# Contents

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Executive Summary	4
1. Introduction	7
2. Attitudes towards Brexit since the referendum	9
3. Identifying as European in post-Brexit Britain	12
4. Contact with the EU within and outside of life in Britain	20
5. The future relationship	26
6. Engaging with the EU through events and schemes	33
7. Conclusions and potential policy implications	39
Appendix: Notes on focus group locations	43

# Executive Summary

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This report examines public attitudes towards the future relationship between the UK and the EU, on issues including European and British identity and values, support or opposition to a closer future relationship with the EU in a range of areas, and interest in exchange programmes and events.

It presents some important evidence about how UK political leaders and policymakers could achieve constructive engagement with the question of the future relationship in ways that could have broad public resonance and appeal,

including across party political and referendum divides.

We used three research methods: an evidence review, a nationally representative survey of 2000 people, carried out by Focaldata, and 12 focus groups in London, Peterborough and Manchester. The research was carried out during June and September 2023. This study, carried out by the think-tank British Future, forms part of a wider project – Our Common Ground – to promote strengthening connections between UK and EU citizens and building a constructive UK-EU relationship.

## What did we find?

### Attitudes toward Brexit

Almost half of the public (49%) now believe it was wrong to leave the EU, while just over a third (36%) think it was right to do so. Almost one in six (15%) said they didn't know. Labour and Conservative supporters feel quite differently: 61% of people intending to vote Conservative say it was right to leave; 69% of Labour supporters say it was wrong. Young people aged 18 to 24 are much more likely to see the decision as wrong than right (60% vs 12%).

### Support for a less heated debate

Most people (59%) would welcome a less heated debate on the UK/EU relationship, with a majority of Conservative (61%) and Labour supporters (68%) in favour of this aim. There is a wider gap, however, between Remainers (76%) and Leavers (56%) on this question.

### Growing appetite for pragmatic cooperation across a number of policy areas

A majority of the public (52%) would like the UK to have a closer relationship with the EU; fewer than one in eight (12%) say they would prefer a more distant relationship, while just over a quarter (27%) would keep the status quo.

Support for a closer relationship is strongest among Labour supporters (68%) and Remainers (81%). Leave supporters and Conservatives (by a small margin) are more likely to favour the status quo than a closer relationship. At the same time, only 17% of Conservatives and 24% of Leavers favour a more distant relationship.

The UK's relationship with the EU is seen by the public as more important for peace, stability and prosperity than that with the United States of America and countries in the Commonwealth. Almost half rank the EU as the most important of these relationships, 26% second and 27% third. Remainers (66%) are much more likely than Leavers (26%) to see the EU as the most important relationship.

Support for UK/EU collaboration is strongest on international crime and terrorism (68%), for example combating trafficking in people and firearms. Other policy areas where support for collaboration is strong are trade (61%), cooperation in science and research (61%), defence (57%), customs (57%), international health (57%), mobility (57%) and sustainability and climate change (56%) and human rights (50%). With the exception of mobility and human rights, Leave voters are more likely to support closer cooperation than either the status quo or less collaboration with the EU.

Support from Remainers for collaboration across policy areas is consistently at least 30 percentage points higher than among Leavers; for example on climate change it is 77% vs 41%. Exceptions to this are international crime and terrorism where support is much closer (82% vs 62%) and trade policy where it is much wider (82% vs 46%).

There is strong public support for collaboration on immigration policies for work and study (61%) with stronger support among Labour supporters (72%) than Conservatives (54%) and Remainers (78%) than Leavers (46%). Support for collaboration over refugee resettlement was lower, at 46% overall and with wider divisions between Remain supporters (64%) and Leave supporters (31%).

### **European identity**

Less than one in ten (9%) people in the UK identify as European and this is lower among ethnic minorities. Even those who do identify as European do not see it as their primary identity. Remainers have a stronger European identity than Leave supporters.

Even those who were born in an EU member state, or have lived in one for more than a year, are unlikely to identify as European. Of this group, only 20% identify as European, and 85% of these rank it below another place-based identity.

### **Perceptions of UK and EU values**

Building a future UK/EU relationship based on shared values is in principle a worthy objective. However, it will be difficult to achieve since British people find it hard to identify either British or EU values. Survey and focus group participants were shown a list which included official British

values and EU values: for example the rule of law, freedom, democracy, equality, human rights and mutual respect. There was a strong tendency for people to attribute all these values to the UK, while fewer also saw them as EU values. Similar numbers felt that these were global values, not just EU values.

### **Social contact between UK and EU citizens**

Most people (56%) have social contact with people from other European countries often or sometimes, and Remainers (64%) more so than Leave supporters (48%). Work colleagues, friends, neighbours and family are the most common forms of contact. Focus group participants said they avoided discussing Brexit both with these contacts and within their family and social circles more generally, for fear of re-opening disagreements and division.

### **Awareness and engagement in exchange initiatives**

Awareness of exchange programmes varied by type of scheme: three-quarters of the public are aware of town twinning, and older people more so, though personal involvement was very low. Similarly, most people are aware of Erasmus and other exchange schemes, though only 11% said they had the opportunity to take part.

Surprisingly, awareness was low among young people, with less than a quarter (24%) of 18-24 year olds both aware of exchange programmes and having opportunities to take part. Yet a majority of people aged 18-24 are interested in taking part in educational exchange programmes, as well as twinning initiatives. Focus group participants talked of the importance of making exchanges inclusive to people on low incomes.

## Our conclusions

The balance of UK attitudes has shifted significantly against the merits of the choice to Leave. At the same time, there is a sense of public exhaustion with the issue of Brexit and most people are keen to put the divisions of previous years behind them. The public would now like a much less heated debate about the future relationship than in the years leading up to and following the referendum. Equally, there is significant aversion among many politicians to revisiting an issue which proved so polarising.

There is significant space in UK public attitudes for an approach to future collaboration that does not revive 2016 divisions. We looked at the role of values in a future UK/EU relationship. We found that people in the UK do not feel European and do not relate to the idea of having shared European values. Yet what this research most clearly shows is that a sense of shared identity is not necessary for a closer relationship.

The public are more likely to support collaboration which is practical and issue-specific, for example as seen in the progress made by the current government on scientific research. Cooperation on security and terrorism has the broadest appeal, among people of different political allegiance, but there is majority support for cooperation across a range of policy areas. If shared values are to be part of such collaboration, this can be shown through demonstrating common objectives in action.

Opportunities for educational and cultural exchanges have declined as a result of Brexit and Covid-19. There is interest in reviving these activities, which offer the potential to share perspectives, experiences and values with citizens of the UK and EU member states. Future programmes should seek to be inclusive, involving people from groups who have typically not been covered by exchange programmes.

# 1. Introduction

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The 2016 EU referendum opened up some of the biggest divides in the history of UK political life. The UK was not just split at the ballot box, which saw a narrow 52% to 48% majority to Leave: the following years saw animosity and polarisation across the public and Parliament as debates focused on the nature of the UK's future relationship with the EU. From 2016-2019, new political identities of "Remainers" and "Leavers" emerged with sharply opposed views about how to resolve the post-referendum stand-off.

However, since the UK left the European Union in January 2020, attitudes have gradually shifted and the heat from these debates has now reduced. Brexit has seen a substantial fall in public salience, eclipsed by Covid-19 and then the cost of living crisis.<sup>(1)</sup> Meanwhile, polling shows that Leave and Remain are now no longer the public's primary political identities.<sup>(2)</sup> Public debate around new decisions, such as on the Windsor Framework and re-joining the Horizon programme, further suggest some opening up of more balanced and pragmatic views on the future UK-EU relationship across former fault lines.

To date, public engagement around attitudes towards the EU and the post-Brexit relationship has been largely tentative. Key political and policy-making voices have continued to be wary of reopening the contested and often polarised debates that characterised the years prior to and following the referendum. This lower salience means that Brexit and the UK-EU relationship seems likely to be a less prominent public issue in the 2024 General Election than in 2019 or 2017.

Nevertheless, the content of the future relationship will be a key theme for both the UK and the EU across the next 5-10 years. It is in this context that this study looked to assess public attitudes towards the principles, motives and reasons for future UK-EU cooperation. This research explores

its scope and its limits, looking for where there is broad and sometimes cross-referendum support, and which perspectives are likely to be more politically contested.

The report examines public perceptions of common ground with EU neighbours. It looks at perceptions of European identity and attitudes regarding shared European values; and it explores levels of social mixing between UK and EU citizens. The study also looks at attitudes toward engagement with EU citizens through events such as Eurovision and schemes such as educational exchanges and town twinning.

The second half of the report explores public attitudes on political questions about our current and future relationship with the EU. It examines where the public would like to see collaboration across with Brussels and where there is less support. We look at variations across different party and referendum lines, across generations and regions of the UK.

The report reflects the analysis and interpretation of British Future, an independent and non-partisan think tank, along with the 3million and Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini. The research was funded by the European Union to help understand how the public view relations with the EU in a post-Brexit political landscape.

This research is intended to be relevant and useful for policy-makers looking to shape the future relationship between the UK and the EU, highlighting areas of growing consensus. The report is also relevant to a broader audience of organisations and civic groups interested in helping to bring together UK and EU citizens to meet and mix, and to form positive social connections. The paper outlines ways to help guide these efforts, based on in-depth qualitative discussions.

(1) Ipsos Issues Index, June 2023. [https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2023-06/Issues%20Index\\_Jun23%20CATI\\_v1\\_PUBLIC.pdf](https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2023-06/Issues%20Index_Jun23%20CATI_v1_PUBLIC.pdf)

(2) <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/are-the-brexit-tribes-disbanding/>

## Research Methods

Research for this report used mixed methods, combining an evidence review with quantitative national survey research and a series of focus group discussions in three locations.

### Evidence review

British Future undertook a detailed evidence review to map existing research studies. This explored published material on the following issues and areas:

- What challenges and opportunities exist to building a new relationship between the UK and the EU?
- What do we know about UK values, EU values, and public perceptions of these?
- What differences have been found in the values of people in Britain, and those in other European countries?
- What do we know about how interests, attitudes and values, could help build new UK/EU relationships?

### Quantitative research

A nationally representative poll of 2,027 UK adult respondents was conducted by Focaldata, with fieldwork carried out online from 29<sup>th</sup> June 2023 to the 11<sup>th</sup> July 2023.

The poll results include demographic differences, including nation and region, ethnic group, education, socioeconomic group, as well as by 2016 EU referendum and present voting intention. The polling also identified respondents who had

been born in an EU member state outside the UK or who had lived in an EU member state outside the UK for over a year.<sup>(3)</sup> We also looked at differences in opinion based on reported levels of day-to-day social contact people had with EU citizens in the UK.

### Qualitative research

British Future undertook twelve online focus group discussions between August and September 2023. The recruitment was designed to incorporate a proportionate mix of attitudes from 2016 Remain voters, Leave voters and participants who did not vote in the EU referendum or were too young to vote. Participants were also recruited to reflect a mix of attitudes based on gender, age, social class, and views on immigration (incorporating those who are confident about immigration to the UK, those who are anxious and concerned about immigration, and sections of the public who see both pressures and gains from immigration).

Three locations were chosen for the focus group discussions to reflect a range of attitudes from communities with different attitudes on Brexit, and varying levels of social contact between UK and EU citizens. Four groups were held in each location:

- Peterborough
- Ealing, London
- Stockport, Greater Manchester

Notes on the selection of focus group locations can be found in the appendix.



(3) Survey respondents included 11% who self-reported being born in a country outside the UK that is EU member state – the proportion in the population as a whole is 6%, so these are slightly over-represented.



## 2. Attitudes towards Brexit since the referendum

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The period since the referendum has been one of continual debate and reflection. In the period immediately following the referendum vote, attitudes remained relatively stable: polls showed that more people continued to believe that the Leave vote was the right decision. However, public attitudes are now quite different: polling from YouGov has found that support for Brexit fell to a record low in November 2022, with fewer than a third (32%) of the British public saying the decision to Leave was the right one and most (56%) saying it was the wrong choice.

The change is explained by a number of shifts:

- Opinion polling has found that Remain voters have largely kept to their position. 91% per cent of 2016 Remain voters in the YouGov survey felt it was wrong to leave; while only 5% now believe it was the right decision.
- Meanwhile there has been a larger shift among Leave supporters. YouGov polling found that 19% now believe it was the wrong decision to leave the EU. Other polls have also shown a steady increase in this sentiment from 2017 to the present, except for brief periods in April 2020 and April 2021.<sup>(4)</sup>
- There has been gradual cohort change in the voting population in the years following the referendum. Some older voters, approximately two-thirds of whom voted for Brexit,<sup>(5)</sup> have passed away, whilst younger, more Brexit-sceptic voters have since entered the electorate.<sup>(6)</sup>
- Post-referendum debates have mobilised some sections of the population that did not vote in 2016. Studies have found that 43% of those who did not vote say they would now vote Remain if given the opportunity to do so, compared with 23% who would vote Leave.<sup>(7)</sup>

A number of different factors are responsible for the change in views among Leave supporters. YouGov asked respondents who said they had voted Leave but by 2022 had changed their minds, why that was the case. Respondents were allowed to answer in their own words, which

YouGov then organised into the closest categories. The most common reasons were:

- Things have got worse
- State of the economy / rising costs
- We were lied to / it hasn't turned out as expected
- Impact on trade and business
- It has been handled badly / bad deal
- We were better as a union / lost benefits of EU

The first of these reasons, that things have become worse since Brexit, was given by 25% of respondents. The second most common response was a little more specific, pointing to the state of the UK economy and the rising cost of living. This was expressed by 19% of respondents. Other reasons concern being misled about the benefits of Brexit, and the quality of the deal.

Reasons that were given by a small minority of Leave supporters (5% or fewer) who had changed their minds included the ending of freedom of movement and worker shortages. Likewise, very few had changed their minds because Brexit has not reduced levels of immigration as they had expected.

None of the response categories formulated by YouGov relate to shared values directly. However, eight per cent said that they had changed their minds because 'We were better as a union/lost benefits of EU membership'. This response is likely to cover a range of factors, economic, political and social. Labour supporters were more likely to express this view than Conservatives, as were people aged over 50, compared to younger respondents.<sup>(8)</sup>

In our nationally representative survey we similarly asked respondents whether they thought it was right or wrong for the UK to leave the EU. The polling found that 49% believe the UK was wrong to leave; 36% felt the UK was right to leave and 15% were unsure and answered 'don't know'. Our findings are consistent with other recent polls, including by YouGov<sup>(9)</sup> and by Delta for the Tony Blair Institute.<sup>(10)</sup>

(4) <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2022/11/17/one-five-who-voted-brexit-now-think-it-was-wrong-d>

(5) Based on Ipsos estimates of the 2016 Referendum vote <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/how-britain-voted-2016-eu-referendum>

(6) <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/will-support-for-brexit-become-extinct/>

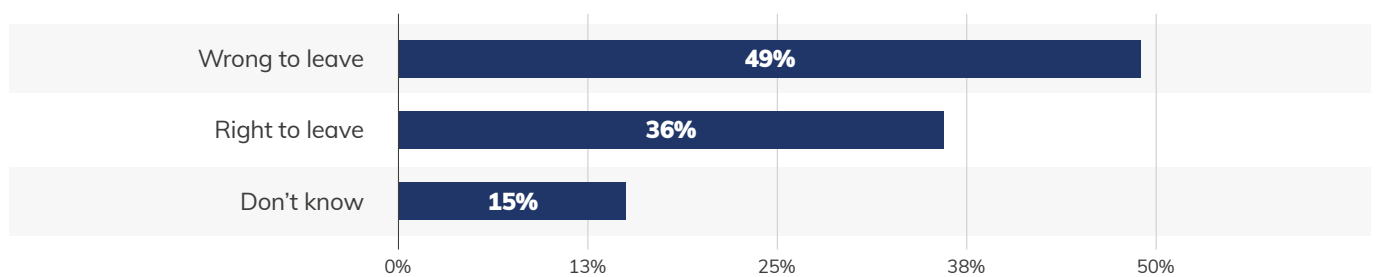
(7) <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/leavers-more-likely-to-regret-brexit-vote-than-remainers-study-finds>

(8) Why have some Leave voters changed their mind on Brexit? | YouGov

(9) You Gov, 2023 op.cit.

(10) <https://www.institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/moving-forward-path-to-better-post-brexit-relationship-between-uk-eu>

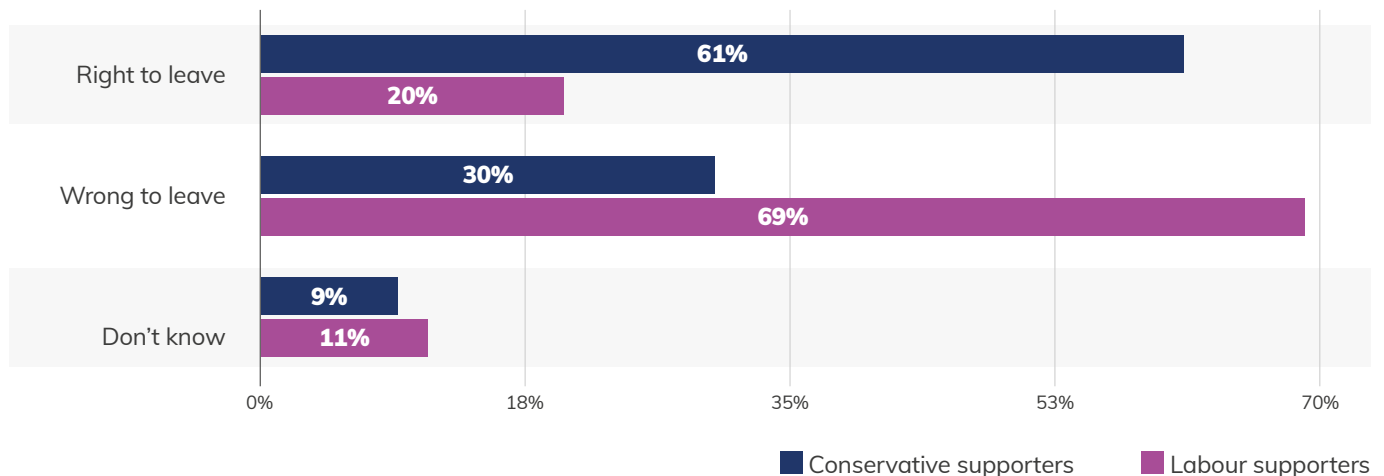
**Figure 2.1: Do you think it was right or wrong for the UK to leave the EU?**



We found marked differences by political preference in views on the UK's decision to leave the EU: 69% of people intending to vote Labour

believe that the decision was wrong, while 61% of those intending to vote Conservative believe it was the right decision.

**Figure 2.2: Do you think it was right or wrong for the UK to leave the EU?**



There was some variation in responses from nations and regions, with 67% of respondents in Scotland and 60% in Northern Ireland thinking it was wrong to leave the EU.

While most 2016 Leave voters still think it has been the right decision to exit the EU, approximately one in seven (14%) answered that they felt the UK was wrong to leave the EU, while a smaller proportion (9%) responded 'don't know'. This compares to a smaller shift (7%) of 2016 Remain voters who now believe that Brexit was the right decision for the UK.

A majority of respondents who did not vote said they thought the decision to leave had been wrong, and only 14% believed it had been the right decision. This reflected variation by age, with 60% of young people aged 18 to 24 believing the decision to leave the EU had been wrong, while just 12% believed it was the right choice.

Concerns of Leave voters have focused on the economic impact of Brexit, including to trade. YouGov polling finds that 75% of Leave voters believe that Brexit had the potential to be a success but implementation by current and previous UK governments have made it fail.<sup>(11)</sup> There has been much discussion and reflection over the loss of other opportunities, such as for young people to take part in study programmes.

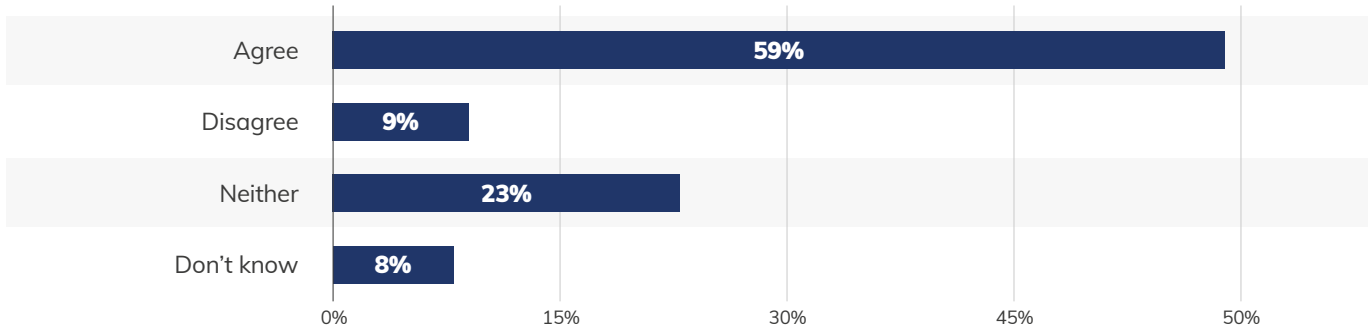
The period since the 2016 referendum has also led many people to reflect on the nature of the debate over the UK's relationship with the EU. Disagreements over Brexit divided families and friends (Davies, 2021).<sup>(12)</sup> Political debate was also divisive in the lead up and aftermath of the referendum.

Our survey finds that people are keen to move on from that period. We found strong agreement across all groups on the value of constructive debate about the future relationship between the UK and the EU.

(11) <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/45733-most-britons-say-brexit-has-been-more-failure>

(12) <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/00380385211011569>

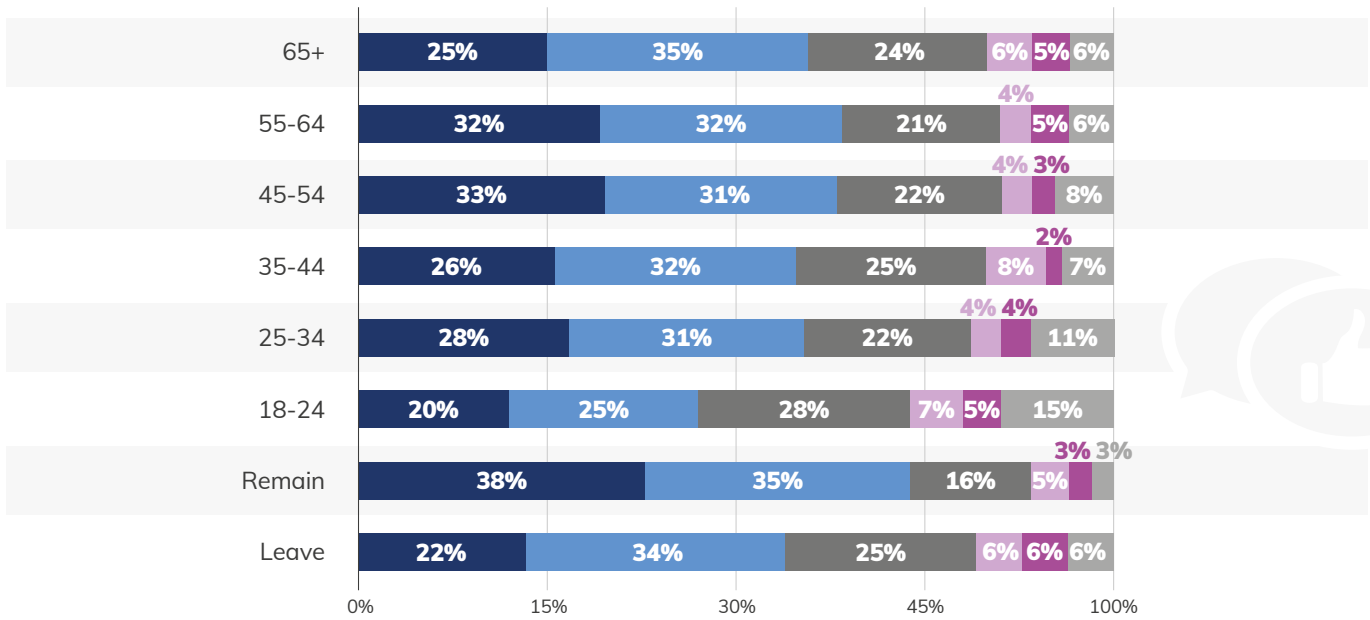
**Figure 2.3:** To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:  
*“I would welcome a less heated debate about the UK’s future relationship with the EU in our politics and our society.”*



There is majority support for a less heated debate on the UK-EU relationship across both 2016 Leave voters (56%) and Remain voters (73%), as well as from both Conservative supporters (61%) and Labour supporters (68%) alike. Importantly, support for a less heated debate was consistent: around six in ten, across all age groups that were

eligible to vote at the time of the referendum. This suggests the potential for an updated and less divisive ‘future relationship’ than previously. Meanwhile younger people aged 18-24, who largely would have been too young to participate in the referendum, showed plurality agreement (45% agree, while 12% disagreed).

**Figure 2.4:** To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:  
*“I would welcome a less heated debate about the UK’s future relationship with the EU in our politics and our society.”*



Note: Aggregate figures may not total 100 due to rounding.

Strongly agree
  Somewhat agree
  Neither agree nor disagree
  Don't know
  Strongly disagree
  Somewhat disagree

### 3. Identifying as European in post-Brexit Britain

It is widely acknowledged that ideas of sovereignty and identity played an important role in people's decisions over the referendum vote. As the authors of the British Attitudes Survey (BSA) point out, 'People are more willing to accept the authority of a set of governing arrangements if they are consistent with their sense of identity'.<sup>(13)</sup> The survey found that, by some way, people who feel European were more likely to have voted Remain than those who do not feel European.

Since 1996 the BSA has routinely presented its respondents with a list of all of the national identities associated with the islands of Great Britain and Ireland, and invited them to select as many as they felt described themselves. Included in the list of options is European. Wave 37, published in 2020, found relatively few people in Britain have felt a sense of European identity. The Survey finds that European was the primary identity for between two and four per cent of the public. Analysis of the BSA findings over time shows that across the twenty years leading up to the referendum, only around one in eight people (12%) said that being European was among their identities. The proportion increased to 18% in the year of the referendum,

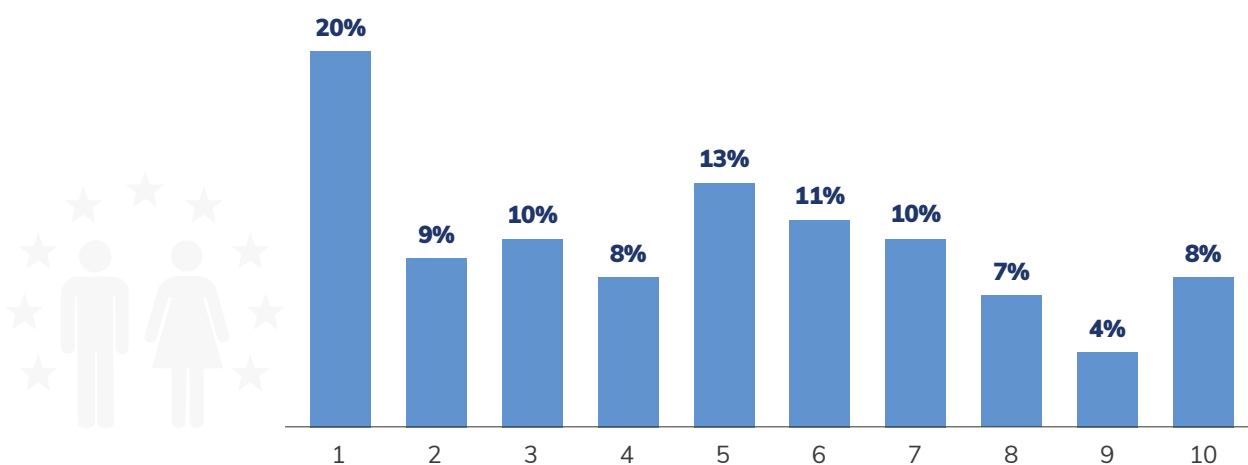
probably reflecting a strengthening of feeling towards remaining in the EU. It has stayed at that level ever since.

Our survey finds that fewer than one in ten (9%) of the public identifies as European and this is lower among ethnic minorities. Graduates and people who have regular contact with European citizens are more likely than others to see themselves as European, though the proportion doing so are still low. Remain voters are also slightly more likely to identify as European, though still only 13% do so.

Even among those who identify as European, very few (4%) rank this as their strongest place-based identity, with the overwhelming majority ranking it behind other identities (e.g. British, English). Those identifying as European are, in general, not those who were born in an EU member state or people who had lived in one for more than a year. Of this group, only 20% identify as European, and 85% of these rank it below another place-based identity.

Respondents were also asked to say to what extent they identify as European, according to a sliding scale where 1 is 'not at all' and 10 is 'very strongly'.

**Figure 3.1: On a scale of 1-10, to what extent do you identify as European?**  
(1 is do not identify as a European at all; 10 is strongly identify as European)



(13) Phillips, D., Curtice, J., Phillips, M. and Perry, J. (eds.) (2018), British Social Attitudes: The 35<sup>th</sup> Report, London: The National Centre for Social Research British Social Attitudes 35: Europe (natcen.ac.uk)

Sixty per cent of respondents gave a score of 1-5 and forty per cent 6-10. Those giving scores of 8-10, strongly identifying as European, were more likely to be living in Northern Ireland or Scotland. Other groups more likely to identify strongly as European are graduates, people in higher social class groups, Remain or Labour supporters, people who were born in or lived in other European countries, or those who have regular contact with EU nationals. Younger people aged under 35 were also in this group.

At the other end of the scale are those scoring only 1-3. These are more likely to be older, aged 55+. They are more likely to be Leave or Conservative supporters and to be non-graduates. They are also more likely to have little or no social contact with European citizens.

Remain and Leave supporters show a somewhat different profile on this question, with half of Remain supporters having a middling sense of European identity, scoring 4-7; while 60% of Leave supporters have a low European identity, scoring 1-3.

The focus groups gave us the opportunity to explore issues around European identity in greater depth. We asked participants to say how European they feel, rather than or as well as being British, English or another identity. They were asked to rate themselves on a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is 'I don't feel European at all', and 10 is 'I feel very European'. As well as assigning themselves a number, participants were asked to explain the reason for their score.

Scores given by participants by support for Remain or Leave followed a similar pattern to those in the survey: Leave supporters tended to have weak or no European identity; Remain supporters were more variable in the self-ratings with many giving middle-range scores, though some gave very high scores of 9 and 10. However, some Remain supporters gave lower scores, since they felt they did not need to feel European to support a close relationship with the EU or to be against Brexit. It was common for these participants to say they had little actual contact with the EU, other than for occasional holidays. Figure 3.2 summarises some of the main reasons for having a strong European identity, and for having a weak one.

**Figure 3.2: Reasons for feeling European, and not European**

Feeling European	Not feeling European
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supporting Remain</li> <li>• Physical closeness to mainland Europe</li> <li>• Frequency of trips, mainly for leisure</li> <li>• Having relatives in EU countries</li> <li>• Having spent time in European countries for work or study</li> <li>• Liking cultures of EU countries</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supporting Leave</li> <li>• Having little contact with EU countries, other than for holidays</li> <li>• Having a strong British identity</li> <li>• Having multiple identities from non-EU birth or parentage</li> <li>• Feeling that European identity is White</li> </ul>

Travel and having family in, or from, other European countries was an important factor for many respondents who identify strongly as European.

*“I’ve travelled extensively, I’ve met a lot of great people visiting some lovely countries and I’m very happy to identify as European as opposed to American or Asian or whatever else.”* – Focus group participant, Ealing.

Participants who had not travelled out of the UK, even for holidays, were less likely to feel a connection with Europe and therefore to identify as European. At the same time, some who holidayed

in Europe regularly didn't feel a connection or a European identity. These included Remain supporters.

Working for a European company made some participants feel European, especially if this had involved living in different EU countries and speaking another European language. At the same time, some people who had lived and worked in Europe did not feel this connection.

Some giving higher scores feel there are similarities across Europe, business-wise and in terms of how economies are run. A number talked

of an affinity and bond, including a shared history. Others recognised these connections but said they still felt British rather than European. Some respondents felt the UK is quite distinct from the rest of Europe. The factors that contributed to this difference, and to feelings of being British and not European, included its system of government, different heritage, currency and monarchy. Some referred to the UK's position as an island, not physically connected to mainland Europe. A minority of Leave supporters expressed the view that the UK has never really been a part of Europe and therefore felt that EU membership did not affect their feelings of being European.

Some participants from elsewhere in Europe, including Russia, Lithuania and Poland, had stronger European identities than others, with their strength of feeling British depending on how long they had lived in the UK and how much time had spent in other EU countries. For these and other participants who were born outside of the UK, feelings of being European were balanced against their other identities, in particular feeling British. Identities in addition to British included Scottish, Irish, Caribbean and Nigerian. While having multiple identities was not seen to be conflictual, some participants felt their sense of being British outweighed any European identity and left it little or no space. These included participants from ethnic minority groups, some of whom also had other identities from their heritage or country of birth. In addition, some ethnic minority participants felt excluded from an EU identity because it is often projected as White. In particular, some felt the European Parliament is not an inclusive institution and voiced concerns about the lack of diversity among elected members of the European Parliament.

As two participants giving a European identity score of 1 or 2 explained:

*"I don't find the EU diverse, I've never seen a black politician in the European Union. [...] The UK is diverse. We've got the Asian Prime Minister, we've had a black Chancellor. If you look through Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrats, what-ever party, there's black, Asian, Chinese, Indian [heritage] MPs. But you look at Europe. No one. And that's frightening for me."* – Focus group participant, Peterborough (ethnic minority).

*"I'm married to an Italian, so my children are half Italian, we go there quite a bit but I don't really relate as much as I don't see myself as European. I don't see myself anywhere near there to be honest. Not necessarily because of anything negative. My parents are originally African, Nigerian. So I think I identify a bit more on my British side, as well as my African heritage."* – Focus group participant, Peterborough (ethnic minority).

However two participants in London of Asian heritage gave themselves a score of 6:

*"Because I have a connection in Asia as well. Because I'm not fully British because I have a family back home as well. So that's why I'm, like, a mix."* – Focus group participant, Ealing (ethnic minority).

*"I do feel very European in the sense that I was born in England and I've lived here my whole life. I haven't been to any other country. The only reason that I didn't put higher than 6 is because of my ethnicity, which is of Asian descent. So that brings it down because I'm the first generation of my family to be in Europe."* – Focus group participant, Ealing (ethnic minority).

Some participants also argued that Europe consists of many different cultures and identities and questioned whether there is one European identity.

Participants were asked whether their feelings about being European have changed over time, for example since the 2016 referendum and Britain's process of leaving the EU, or whether they had stayed the same. Most participants said their feelings had been quite stable, since they were connected with their feelings of being British (or another identity) and how connected they felt to mainline Europe rather than to the EU.

Almost all of those who felt their feelings had changed as a result of Brexit said they had become weaker, rather than stronger. In some cases this weakening of European identity had resulted from having less interaction with European countries, including for work. However, in most cases the change was related to a feeling of greater separation.

Some feel that the UK has been badly treated, which has affected their feelings. This was felt by some people who are opposed to Brexit as well as those who voted Leave. A common perspective was that some felt that the attitudes of people in EU countries have changed. Two people who said their feelings of being European had reduced since the Referendum explained:

*“I’d give myself a 2 or 3 and that’s only because since Brexit I don’t feel part of Europe at all, even though we are in Europe. I do think that has had a massive impact on how other European people look at us.”* – Focus group participant, Peterborough.

*“The whole Brexit situation has made us as a country feel more isolated, which in turn has made me feel more isolated. Also, and it might be a media twist on it, but you always feel like there’s a bit of dislike towards the English, they don’t particularly like you. So I feel slightly more alienated and not part of Europe.”* – Focus group participant, Peterborough.

It was quite common for participants to express the view that the UK has been badly treated by the EU during Brexit negotiations, and that this had affected their view of the EU.

Some Remain supporters expressed strong opinions about the impact of leaving the EU, which in some cases had strengthened their feelings of being European:

*“I feel like when we were part of Europe everything was better. Canals, better sewage, travel better... I think the European standards kept us in line.”* – Focus group participant, Stockport.

We also asked focus group participants whether, and how, Brexit has affected them personally. Some respondents felt that their daily lives were affected, while others did not. Respondents who

felt the impact typically referred to buying goods from mainland Europe for personal use and some talked about shortages of some foods, particularly vegetables, in supermarkets.

Some respondents said that travel to mainland Europe has become more difficult, and in particular that they had endured long waits in passport queues. Worries about a future EU visa waiver scheme were raised in a few focus groups. Those with second homes, or with families who live in mainland Europe, also referred to restrictions on length of stays. Changes in rules allowing pets to travel had affected some. A number of participants also said that working in EU countries has become more difficult. This included being able to bring work supplies through border control.

Some participants felt the end of free movement affected future options, in particular to live in mainland Europe. This included joining family who have made their home outside of the UK. Specific concerns included restrictions on annual periods of residence, health coverage and ease of travel.

For others, the impact was less practical than in sentiment and hopes for the future. As one young man explained:

*“I miss the connection that we have. I think if you look locally in Peterborough, we do have quite a number of European communities that have been going on for a long time. I went to school where children are Italian origin, Polish origin and I felt more European.”* – Focus group participant, Peterborough.

Some older participants regretted the loss of freedom of movement to live and work in mainland Europe, not for themselves but for their children and grandchildren. One young man who had taken part in the Erasmus programme was sorry that his sister could not participate in the scheme.

## What values are perceived as EU/UK/global (survey and focus groups)

The EU has a clear set of values. These are laid out in article 2 of the Lisbon Treaty and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.<sup>(14)</sup> These values are described in Figure 3.3 below.

While the EU's values are clearly set out, there is no formal list of British values. Moreover, there is

no agreement on what British values are. Values that are generally thought of as British include democracy and the rule of law, reason, individual liberty and tolerance. These can be traced to the Magna Carta, signed in 1215<sup>(15)</sup> and to the 18<sup>th</sup> century pan-European Enlightenment era.<sup>(16)</sup> In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the period following the Second World War also saw a notable expression of values, with fairness and opportunity shaping thinking and domestic policy to a greater degree than in the past.

**Figure 3.3: EU values**

### Human dignity

Human dignity is inviolable. It must be respected, protected and constitutes the real basis of fundamental rights.

### Freedom

Freedom of movement gives citizens the right to move and reside freely within the Union. Individual freedoms such as respect for private life, freedom of thought, religion, assembly, expression and information are protected by the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

### Democracy

The functioning of the EU is founded on representative democracy. A European citizen automatically enjoys political rights. Every adult EU citizen has the right to stand as a candidate and to vote in elections to the European Parliament. EU citizens have the right to stand as a candidate and to vote in their country of residence, or in their country of origin.

### Equality

Equality is about equal rights for all citizens before the law. The principle of equality between women and men underpins all European policies and is the basis for European integration. It applies in all areas. The principle of equal pay for equal work became part of the Treaty of Rome in 1957.

### Rule of law

The EU is based on the rule of law. Everything the EU does is founded on treaties, voluntarily and democratically agreed by its EU countries. Law and justice are upheld by an independent judiciary. The EU countries gave final jurisdiction to the European Court of Justice - its judgments have to be respected by all.

### Human rights

Human rights are protected by the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. These cover the right to be free from discrimination on the basis of sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation, the right to the protection of your personal data, and the right to get access to justice.

(14) Phillips, D., Curtice, J., Phillips, M. and Perry, J. (eds.) (2018), British Social Attitudes: The 35<sup>th</sup> Report, London: The National Centre for Social Research British Social Attitudes 35: Europe (natcen.ac.uk)

(15) Magna Carta - UK Parliament

(16) The Enlightenment | The British Library (bl.uk)

(17) Ofsted guidance <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/guidance-on-promoting-british-values-in-schools-published>



**Figure 3.4: What are the five British Values in Education?**

### **1. Respect for the rule of law**

Respect for the rule of law means that everyone in society is treated equally and fairly, and that everyone follows the same rules and laws. This value promotes a sense of order and stability in society, and helps to prevent crime and other harmful behaviours. The UK justice system is a large part of this, including laws, police officers and courts.

### **2. Individual liberty**

Individual liberty allows people to pursue their own goals and interests, providing they do not harm others. This British value is based on the idea that people should be free to make their own decisions and choices within the bounds of the law, of course.

### **3. Democracy**

Democracy is the foundation of the UK's political system. This value is based on the idea that everyone should have an equal say in how their country is run, and that the government should be accountable to the people. All things voting, elections and referendums come in to play here.

### **4. Mutual respect and 5. Tolerance of different faiths and beliefs**

The fourth British Value is often split into two: (1) Mutual respect and (2) tolerance of different faiths and beliefs. Whether you view these as one whole, or as two individual values, they both promote understanding and acceptance of people from different backgrounds and with different beliefs, and help to create a more inclusive and diverse society.

Source: Votes for Schools <https://www.votesforschools.com/blog/british-values/#section-2>

An official government list of British values has been highlighted in relation to schools, and work with children and young people. UK schools are expected to ensure that pupils understand and learn a set of values, and that these are British. These include respect for the rule of law, individual liberty, democracy, and mutual respect for and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs (see Figure 3.4). Schools are expected to include British values as part of their spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development of pupils.<sup>(17)</sup>

Our survey presented respondents with a set of values, adapting these slightly to help them to be understood. Respondents were asked whether they thought these are UK, EU or world values.

As Figure 3.5 shows, respondents were not able to correctly identify which of the values listed in the survey were those of the EU, the UK or were global. There was a strong tendency to attribute them all to the UK rather than to the EU.

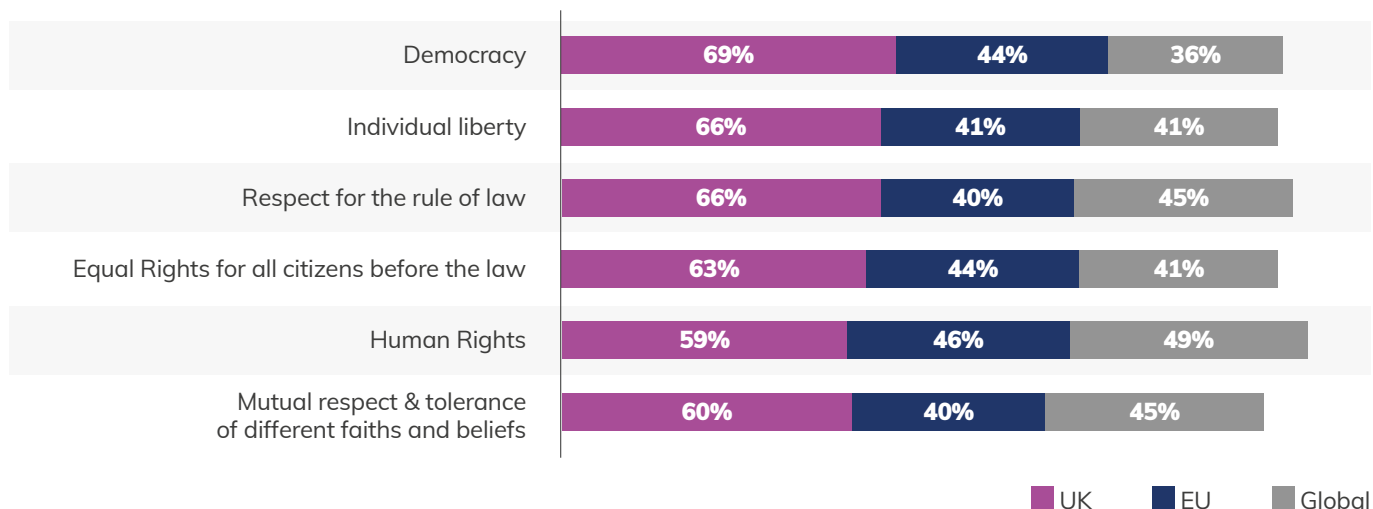
Three of these values – democracy, individual liberty and respect for the rule of law – are both EU and UK values. However, two-thirds of respondents saw each of these as British values. A minority saw these as EU values or as global values (though even fewer saw democracy as a global value). Respondents also saw equal rights for all citizens before the law as a UK value, even though it is explicitly an EU value. Similarly, human rights are seen as more British than EU. Mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs is correctly identified with the UK, though less strongly than most other values.

There were some differences by age, with older respondents (65+) more likely to view equal rights and human rights as European values, and younger respondents (18-24) less likely to. Remain voters were slightly more likely to view some values as belonging to the EU, but this included the British value of mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs.

**Figure 3.5:** For each of the following values, please tick whether you believe they are UK values, European values, global values, or a combination. You may tick more than one option.

	UK	EU
Democracy	✓	✓
Individual liberty	✓	✓
Respect for the rule of law	✓	✓
Equal Rights for all citizens before the law		✓
Human Rights		✓
Mutual respect & tolerance of different faiths and beliefs	✓	

**Figure 3.6:** For each of the following values, please tick whether you believe they are UK values, European values, global values, or a combination. You may tick more than one option.



The focus groups included an exploration of European values, which we introduced with a discussion of British values. We asked focus group participants to name a British value, then to name EU values, and whether they thought these are similar or different to British values. We then showed participants a list of values (see

Figure 3.5) first blank and then whether they are UK, EU values or both.

People found it difficult to identify a British value since they were neither familiar with the official set of values, nor was it something they had given much thought to. Only a very small number

of participants, connected to education and schools, had any degree of familiarity with the idea of official British values: it was common for focus group participants to suggest behaviours and preferences, such as queuing or being polite, rather than values of the State.

Participants were able to identify a number of possible British values, usually with some guidance. The most commonly cited were democracy, respect for other cultures, tolerance and inclusivity and, to a lesser degree, human rights. A few participants mentioned the legal system and respect for the rule of law. Participants in most focus groups believed that respect, tolerance and inclusivity is a British value in theory and in practice. One participant talked of how he was welcomed in his early days of living in the UK:

*“I was an immigrant a few years back... Getting acceptance from British people was so much easier than I thought. It was welcoming in my workplace as well... so I felt welcomed into Britain when I came here.”* – Focus group participant, Ealing.

When asked to name EU values, participants had similar difficulty identifying any. Many were of the view that they are fairly similar or the same as British values. Some groups felt that human rights are more an EU value than a British one, particularly in practice. On this issue participants referred to the role of the European Court of Human Rights in decisions about the legality of the UK's practices towards asylum seekers.

When shown the actual values of the EU and of Britain, some participants expressed surprise that they are different and in the way that they are. Some were surprised that human rights and equal rights are not official British values. However, they felt that these are values in practice, expressed by laws. Most participants were less surprised that mutual respect is a British, and not an EU value. Some explained this with reference to the French government's policies over Muslim clothing.

It was also argued that the idea of EU or UK values is too broad, that the EU covers many different

countries and cultures, which vary in their value systems. As one participant stated:

*“It all depends on the political leaders of these countries to really subscribe to these values. Everything depends on the political leaders. Some leaders might really not subscribe to all the values of the European Union.”* – Focus group participant, Peterborough.

Some participants also referred to differences between EU member states. In particular it was argued that the values of some EU countries are less liberal than others, including in relation to equality issues, for example on sexual orientation. Several focus groups also raised the question of difference in attitudes between Eastern and Western European member states.

Although participants were able to engage with a discussion about British and EU values, overall values were not seen to be a useful way of thinking about the UK/EU relationship. They were seen as at too high a level to be meaningful, but also not to reflect either the practice of institutions or of the beliefs and priorities of individuals. As one participant stated:

*“What do values actually mean? Today, we weren't shouting out the answers [easily]. They're there and they're written down but how far are people aware of them? People hold them on a day-to-day basis naturally. But anything could be written down like that. Does it make a huge amount of difference?”* – Focus group participant, Peterborough.

A more frequently made point was that, in practice, people share similar values in their daily lives and in how they expect to be treated and to treat others. These values were seen to include treating people well, fairly and in ensuring that people have freedoms and are protected by the law. In line with earlier observations about differences between EU member states, some participants expressed the view that attitudes and behaviours of populations are not necessarily consistent across Europe. As evidence for this, some participants mentioned greater racism in some European countries, for example at football matches.

## 4. Contact with the EU within and outside of life in Britain

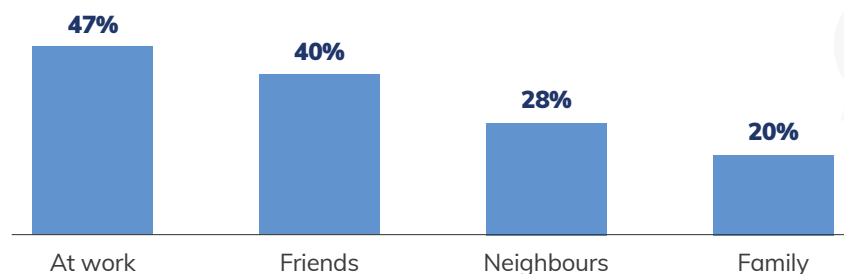
We asked survey respondents how often they have the opportunity to meet and interact with people from other European countries. An overall majority (56%) said they had such contact often or sometimes, and 44% said they never or rarely had this experience. Younger people aged 18-24 were more likely to say they had these opportunities (59%) than those aged 65+ (44%). Almost two-thirds (64%) of Remain voters said they have regular social contact with people from other European countries, compared to less than half (48%) of those voting Leave.

Probably reflecting the distribution of EU citizens across the UK, social contact is reported to be much higher in Greater London (69%). However, it

is also reported to be higher in Scotland, at 62%. Regions with lower social contact with EU citizens are Wales (44%), the West Midlands (45%) and North East England, probably reflecting local populations.

The survey also asked when respondents have the opportunity to meet and interact with people from other European countries. As Figure 4.1 shows, work was the most commonly cited situation, followed by friends. Younger people and those in higher social class groups were more likely than others to have opportunities at work; respondents aged 65+ are more likely to have social contact with neighbours. This is likely to extend to include neighbours from all types of background.

**Figure 4.1:** When do you normally have the opportunity to meet and interact with people from other European countries? You can select multiple options.



The focus groups explored the role of social contact in attitudes about the UK's future relationship with the EU. We asked participants about the types of contact they have with people from EU countries living in the UK. We explained that these might be friends, family, neighbours or work colleagues. The amount of social contact reported by participants varied, with some saying it is a common occurrence, and others saying it is not usual. Participants in the London and Peterborough groups reported considerably higher general levels of contact than those in Stockport. Some participants were themselves from EU countries and so clearly had daily contact with family and sometimes friends.

Participants in the London focus groups described a range of circumstances in which they

had contact with people from EU countries. Some talked of everyday contact:

*“Meet them every day. At mums’ groups and stuff. At work as well, an everyday occurrence and I don’t really think about it to be honest.”*  
– Focus group participant, Ealing.

Others said they worked with people from a range of EU, and non-EU countries:

*“It’s mostly work [tech sector]. So I primarily work with six people. One of them is Italian, one German, one from Israel. My senior manager is British, and another person from Portugal and another person from Belarus. So it’s definitely quite a diverse group.”* – Focus group participant, Ealing.

*“I work in a predominantly French office in Brentford so my professional life is surrounded by French people... So professionally I feel like I’m quite immersed I guess in EU interactions. Outside of that, I’ve got some extended family that live in Ireland and in Spain and Portugal.”* – Focus group participant, Ealing.

Participants in other focus groups, particularly those in Peterborough, also had contact with people from the EU at work. Sectors most commonly mentioned included IT, retail, Higher Education, tourism, financial services and social care.

Participants in London and in Peterborough also talked about having neighbours and friends from EU countries. A minority then had family from EU countries, including partners and partners of children. As one participant explained:

*“My brother lives in Germany and his wife is German and my mum emigrated over from France to the UK when she was 17. My grandparents are pretty much French and obviously I live in a huge range of cultures we have on our doorstep.”* – Focus group participant, Ealing.

One participant living in Peterborough talked of the diversity in his neighbourhood:

*“The area I live in our square is literally little Europe. We’ve got all types in my area and they are fantastic, they are very friendly. They’ll chat to you. We all stand up outside and have a chat when we go to work or get home and meet up. Everybody says hello to everybody.”* – Focus group participant, Peterborough.

We asked participants whether they talk with these contacts about the EU, Brexit or the UK’s relationship with the EU. It was most common for people to say they do not. While they did have conversations about Brexit, they were reported to be quite limited to occasional discussions at home, at work or in social situations. They were generally not with people from the EU and were focused on the impacts of Brexit.

A number of participants said they talk about it less with the passing of time since the referendum:

*“We talked about with people when it happened and at the time, but not so much now. It’s been a few years.”* – Focus group participant, Peterborough.

It was common for participants to say they avoided discussions about Brexit, from concern that it would be divisive and discussions would become heated:

*“I really tend to be careful, because I know it’s a very, very divisive issue. And the fact that it’s already happened too, talking about it won’t stop it from happening. It happened already. So I would leave it that way and just talk about something else.”* – Focus group participant, Peterborough

Some participants said they felt especially wary of discussing Brexit with European citizens. They felt it might be awkward:

*“It’s a bit of a touchy subject really discussing that because it hasn’t really turned out the best thing to do really... So you can imagine trying to get the conversation going with someone from an EU country, it’s a bit hard to because I don’t think it’s panned out the way it was intended to.”* – Focus group participant, Ealing

There was also a feeling that concerns about Brexit have now taken second place, initially because of the Covid-19 pandemic and then the cost of living crisis. For some, this reduced the appetite for heated discussion:

*“Peoples’ patience is very thin. You know we’ve obviously been through Brexit, we’ve had to go through COVID, and we’re going through the cost of living crisis and I just don’t think peoples’ tolerance is there at the moment.”* – Focus group participant, Stockport.

*“Brexit has gone out of peoples’ minds. There are more problems at hand now to resolve. Without Covid we would have continued to discuss Brexit but I feel like Brexit is done and dusted.”* – Focus group participant, Ealing.

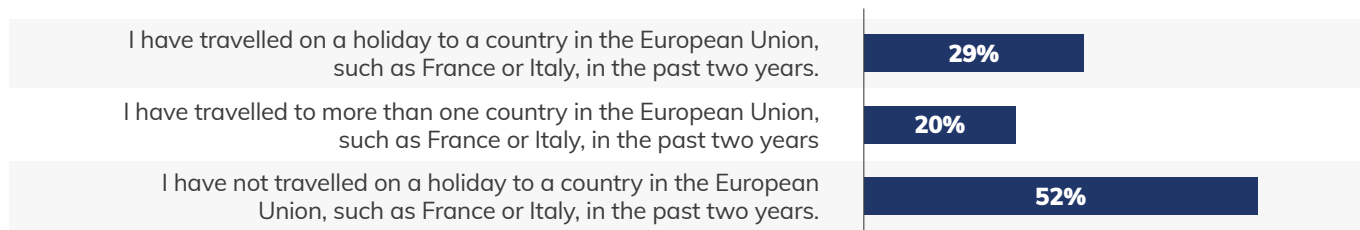
### **Social contact and travel**

We asked survey and focus group participants whether they had visited EU countries. As Figure 4.2

shows, just over half of survey respondents (52%) said they had not holidayed in the EU. Experiences reflected social class, with 58% of respondents in higher social class groups saying they had travelled to at least one EU country

compared to 33% of those in lower social class groups. Indeed, across our focus groups, many in lower socio-economic groups noted that they were ‘thinking twice’ about travelling abroad to Europe due to soaring costs of travel and accommodation.

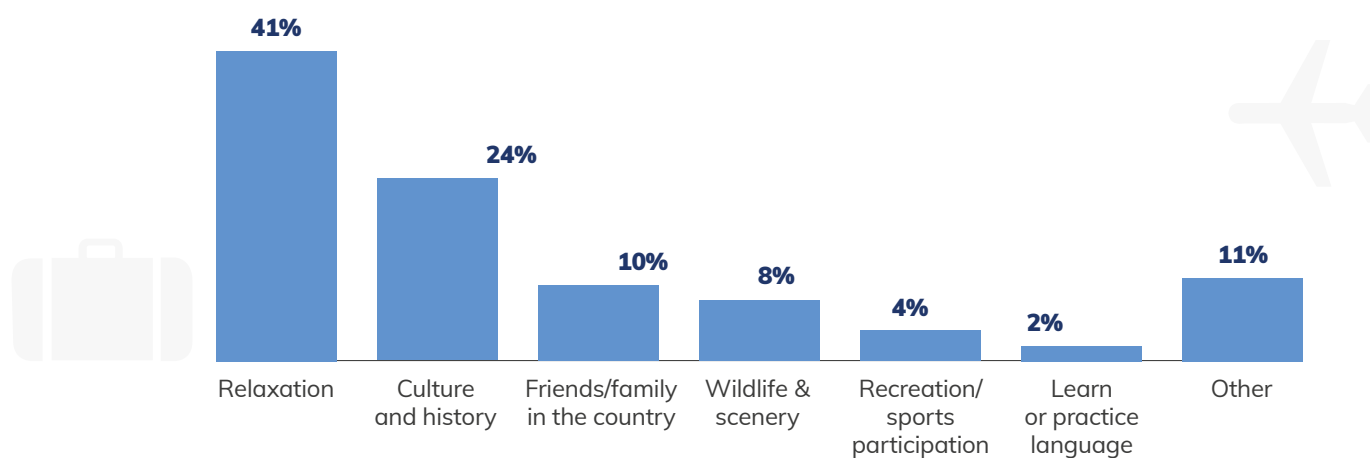
**Figure 4.2: Which of the following statements applies best to you?**



As Figure 4.3 shows, relaxation was the main reason for these trips, followed by culture and history. Similar reasons were shared throughout the focus group discussions, where the majority had chosen Europe as a holiday

destination due to convenience and cheaper travel costs. Other participants noted enjoying experiencing other ‘European lifestyles’ and getting to know the rich history of other European countries.

**Figure 4.3: Please pick your main reason for choosing to go on holiday to a country in the European Union?**



While not the primary reason for travelling to European countries, participants in the focus groups often noted an enthusiasm for meeting and mixing with residents of other countries abroad. This was most commonly through holidays founded around shared interests such as spectator sports, participatory sports such as skiing, and road-trips or interrailing. Many shared positive experiences of social mixing abroad, with some having formed long-term friendships.

*people who are French or Germans and end up having drinks at the bars with them. And they’re all different but you respect that.” – Focus group participant, Stockport.*

*“I go to World Cups and the Euros to watch England, and I love the patriotism that everyone has, I respect that. You meet*

This rarely contributed to participants holding a stronger sense of European identity; to the contrary it was often noted that European connections made abroad were more likely to affiliate with a national identity – as ‘French’ or ‘Czech’ for example – than European. However, participants with experiences of social mixing abroad often reflected that these had given them a sense of common ground and closeness with other countries in Europe.

*“I’ve travelled extensively in Europe. I’m a member of Motorcycle Club and I used to meet up with people as far as the Ukraine and Greece and other countries in between. When I made friends over there, they’re not Europeans: they’re Belgian or they’re Polish or Ukrainian [...] But the people there were great.”* – Focus group participant in Stockport.

It is noteworthy though that a large number of participants felt they had been, or would be, treated differently when travelling in the EU after Brexit. A key theme shared consistently within almost every group was a sense of concern – voiced by both Leave and Remain voters – that European citizens now had begun to view people in the UK with animosity since the referendum. Focus group participants frequently shared their perceptions that *“I don’t feel that we are particularly accepted over there anymore, they don’t want anything to do with us.”* Some of these were based on examples of tense social contact, including where participants had faced sometimes difficult conversations from others asking why the UK had left. Yet oftentimes this emerged as an anticipation that – due to a volatile political relationship with the EU – citizens would view people in the UK less warmly.

Studies have found that meta-perspectives – or perceptions of how we think we are seen by relevant others – are influential in shaping self-identities and political attitudes.<sup>(18)</sup> This suggests that initiatives to communicate or encourage social contact and common UK-European identities should consider how bringing people of different nationalities together might help to challenge such perceptions of how EU citizens view people in the UK.

## Learning European languages

Learning a European language has a range of potential benefits for people in the UK. These

include opportunities to form friendships with EU citizens inside the UK and abroad, and to develop a deeper appreciation of culture and common values in other countries. In polling research exploring what the UK public view as being the key advantages of learning a foreign language, 70% of people cited that ‘it increases understanding of different cultures.’<sup>(19)</sup>

It is clear that the value of learning is strongly recognised by the public. Tracker survey data by YouGov shows that 76% of people believe it is quite or very important for modern foreign languages such as French, German and Spanish to be taught in secondary school; and that this figure has remained stable since Britain’s departure from the European Union.<sup>(20)</sup> At the same time, take-up of language learning in formal education has been in decline.<sup>(21)</sup> The British Council notes that this has been combined with a fall in international activities at primary and State secondary schools, such as partnering with a school abroad, involvement in international projects and hosting a language assistant.<sup>(22)</sup>

Similarly in higher education, courses for the most commonly taught European languages (French, German and Spanish) have all seen a protracted fall in course numbers, particularly on single honours degrees.<sup>(23)</sup>

A range of factors could be underlying these trends, which appear at odds with public appraisal of the value in learning languages. It may be partly that modes of learning have shifted in recent years. While language learning in formal education has fallen in recent years, there has been increased interest in post-school learning: one in ten UK adults, for example, used the first Covid-19 lockdown to try learning a language. This has largely been through popular online learning platforms such as Duolingo.<sup>(24)</sup>

(18) Obradović S. and Draper H (2022). ‘Dialogue with Difference: Meta-representations in Political Dialogue and their Role in Constructing the “Other.”’ *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 10.1, pp. 218-235.

(19) YouGov survey of 2,000 UK adults (16-20 Nov, 2020) for British Council. <https://www.britishcouncil.org/about/press/six-ten-uk-adults-wish-they%E2%80%99d-kept-foreign-language-they-studied-school>

(20) Language learning was similarly viewed as important among 75% of ‘Leave’ voters. YouGov tracker survey of 1645-1791 GB adults. <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/education/trackers/how-important-is-it-to-teach-modern-foreign-languages-eg-french-at-secondary-school>

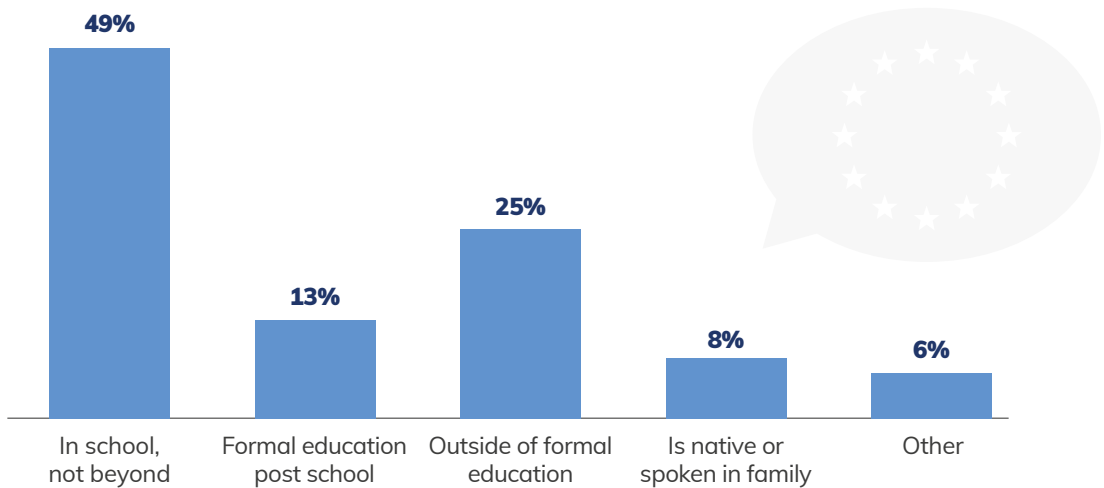
(21) <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7388/>

(22) British Council (2022), ‘Language Trends England’ <https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/research-reports/language-trends-2022>

(23) The British Academy and University Council of Modern Languages (2022) ‘Languages Learning in Higher Education: Granular Trends’ [https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/4437/Languages-learning-in-higher-education-November\\_2022\\_vf.pdf](https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/4437/Languages-learning-in-higher-education-November_2022_vf.pdf)

(24) YouGov survey of 2,000 UK adults (16-20 Nov, 2020) for British Council. <https://www.britishcouncil.org/about/press/six-ten-uk-adults-wish-they%E2%80%99d-kept-foreign-language-they-studied-school>

**Figure 4.4: Past learning of European language**



The nationally representative survey found that, in total, 36% of UK adults are learning or have learned to speak a European language that is not British, while 64% had not. Of those who had learned a language, roughly half (49%) had stopped practicing beyond school. Meanwhile one in eight (13%) formally studied a language education beyond school, for example at university and one in four (25%) learned outside of formal education, such as through evening classes and online apps.

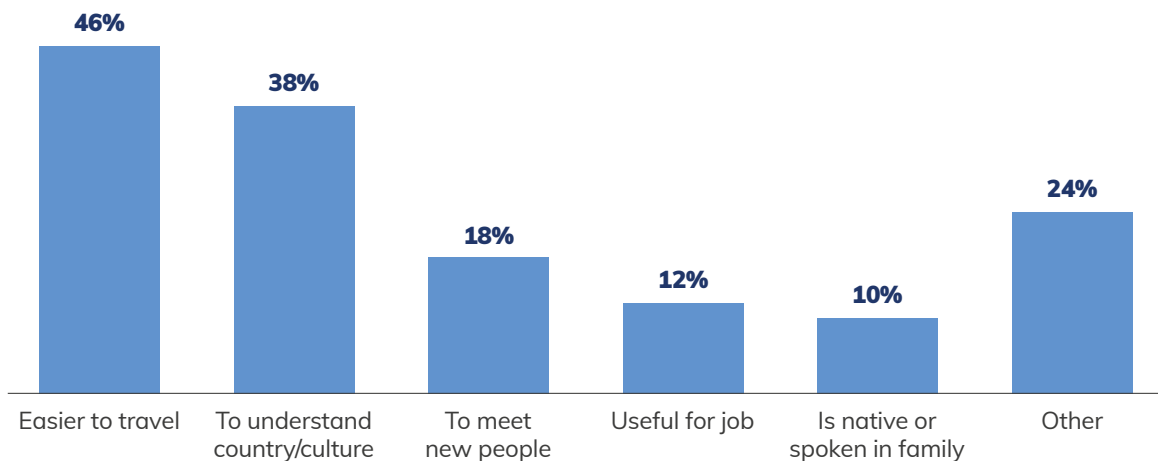
Younger people were more likely to say they had learned a language than those in older age groups, probably reflecting changes in the school curriculum over time or that some older people had lost the language skills they had acquired at a younger age.

While only just over a quarter (27%) of Leave voters said they had learned a European

language, more than four in ten (44%) Remain voters said they had done so. Similarly, language learning was also more common among respondents in higher social class groups. There were also regional differences: for example 44% of Londoners said they had learned a European language compared to 27% of people in Yorkshire.

Among those who had not learned another European language, 48% said they were interested to try, while just over half (52%) said they were not. Younger respondents aged 18-24 were more likely to express an interest (55%) than those aged 65+, of whom around one in three (31%) would consider learning a new European language. Those who already had regular social contact with other European nationals also showed a considerably stronger interest (60%) than those with few or no opportunities for social mixing (37%).

**Figure 4.5: What are the main reasons why you learned a main language that is not English?**





Within those who had learned or were learning a European language, 46% cited travel as their main reason, while 38% wanted to strengthen their understanding of another country or culture and 18% wanted to meet new people.

Older respondents are more likely to have learned a language for the purpose of travelling. Younger respondents aged 18-24 are more likely to say they learned another language in order to understand another country or culture (40%) than older participants aged 65+ (30%). Yet young people aged 18-24 were also the least likely to cite that they were learning a language to meet new people (9%), compared with 28% of those aged 35-44 learning a language and 18% of those over 65.

Throughout our focus group discussions, participants across ages and regions often shared a feeling that it was 'common courtesy' when travelling in Europe to learn at least basic phrases in a language, so as to talk with residents of that country. A majority of the focus group participants felt that they lacked the time after leaving school to continue practicing a language although, for some, online apps such as Duolingo had enabled them to flexibly learn around busy lives.

For focus group participants who had learned another European language to fluency or proficiency, the main benefit cited was social

connection, either with friends and family in the UK from other European countries or for meeting people abroad.

*"I'm learning French – I've been learning for around three years. It broadens your horizons, when I'm speaking French with people you realise how many things that I love. I find that they love it, too. It just sort of reconfirms that connection, like a love of sports, or whatever it is. They're just the same as us."* – Focus group participant, Ealing.

*"You can get by with translation apps, but you're never going to have a proper connection with someone in Europe itself through using Google Translate than you would speaking a language [...] If I hadn't have learned French, then when I was in France, I wouldn't have had nearly as much fun as I did, through speaking French and being able to speak to the people that couldn't speak English."* – Focus group participant, Peterborough.

Overall, our findings suggest widespread acceptance of the value of learning to speak European languages for communication and cultural understanding. This was expressed alongside an interest in learning a European language at a future point. However, language skills of the British public were not viewed as particularly relevant to the future relationship between the UK and the EU.

## 5. The future relationship

The initial years following the 2016 referendum saw hotly contested debates over the content and closeness of the UK’s future relationship with the EU. While the referendum itself had asked the country to choose between ‘Remain’ and ‘Leave’, new fault lines emerged from Parliament to family dinner tables over what exactly a withdrawal from the EU should look like in practice: whether a ‘hard Brexit’ or ‘soft Brexit’, a ‘Swiss Model’ or a ‘No Deal’.

Yet with the final withdrawal of the UK in 2020, the national salience of Brexit within public attitudes saw a steep drop-off. While chosen as a ‘top three’ most important issue in December 2020 by 60% of people in the UK, this decreased to just 23% by June 2021. A protracted decrease in salience has continued in the following years.<sup>(25)</sup>

Nonetheless, alongside the fall in salience of Brexit, we found that much of the polarisation

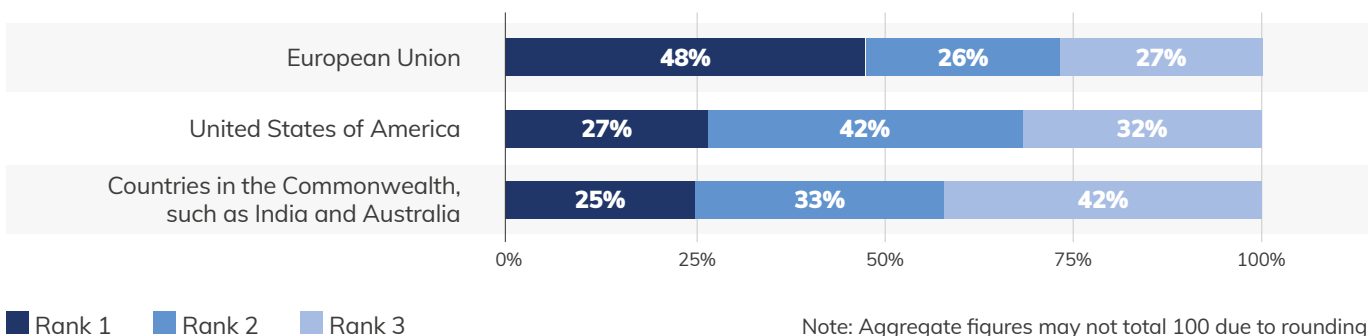
observed over the Brexit ‘transition years’ has now been replaced by more pragmatic and nuanced attitudes among the public over preferences for the future UK-EU relationship. Both the survey and the focus group discussions asked a range of questions about the importance of relations with the EU and the areas of policy cooperation and collaboration this should involve.

### The importance of relations with the EU compared to the USA and Commonwealth

In the survey, respondents were asked to rank the UK’s relationship with the EU, the USA and Commonwealth countries such as India and Australia, based on which they saw as most important for peace, stability and prosperity.

As Figure 5.1 shows, almost half of respondents (48%) ranked the EU first in terms of the importance of UK relationships, above the US (27%) and Commonwealth (25%).

**Figure 5.1: Out of the relationships between the UK and other countries and institutions shown below, please rank which you see as being the most important for peace, stability and prosperity.**



Attitudes on importance of the UK-EU relationship remain polarised by Leave and Remain vote. Two thirds (66%) of Remain voters see the EU relationship as most important, compared to 26% of Leave voters, a larger proportion of whom ranked the UK’s relationship with countries in the Commonwealth (38%) and with the USA (35%) as more important. A majority of Labour supporters

(56%) also rank the EU relationship as top, while Conservative supporters are split almost evenly between the EU (34%), the USA (33%) and the Commonwealth (32%).

A majority of young respondents aged between 18-34 see the UK-EU relationship as most important (54%) as do approximately half of

(25) Ipsos Issues Index, June 2023. [https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2023-06/Issues%20Index\\_Jun23%20CATL\\_v1\\_PUBLIC.pdf](https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2023-06/Issues%20Index_Jun23%20CATL_v1_PUBLIC.pdf)

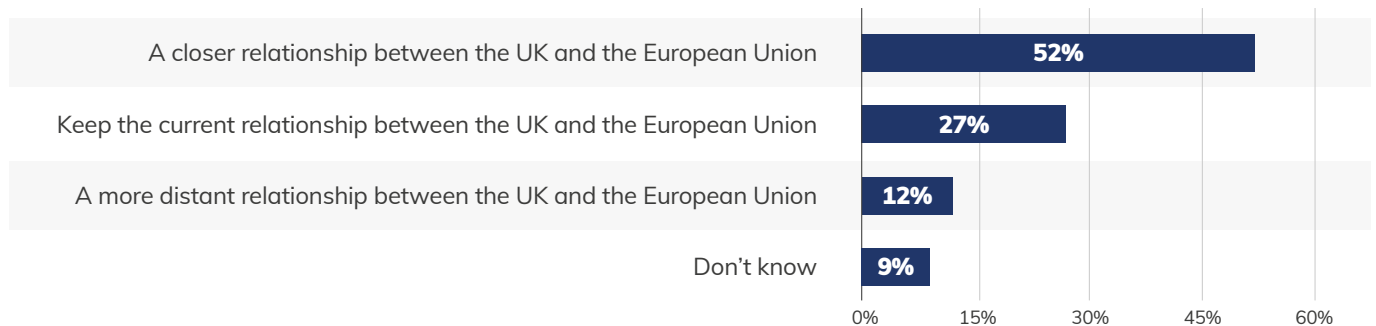
those aged between 35-64, yet this falls to 37% among over-65s. There is also variation in attitudes across the nations of the UK, with a majority of people in Scotland (56%) and Wales (54%) viewing the EU relationship as most important for peace, stability and prosperity.

### How close or distant the UK's relationship should be

A majority of survey respondents (52%) said they would like the UK to have a closer

relationship with the EU, while 12% said that they would prefer a more distant relationship and 27% would keep the status quo. This was again much higher in Scotland and Wales, where around two-thirds of respondents supported a closer relationship. Graduates and younger people were more likely to support a closer relationship than non-graduates and older people. Respondents with regular contact with European citizens were also somewhat more supportive of a closer UK/EU relationship.

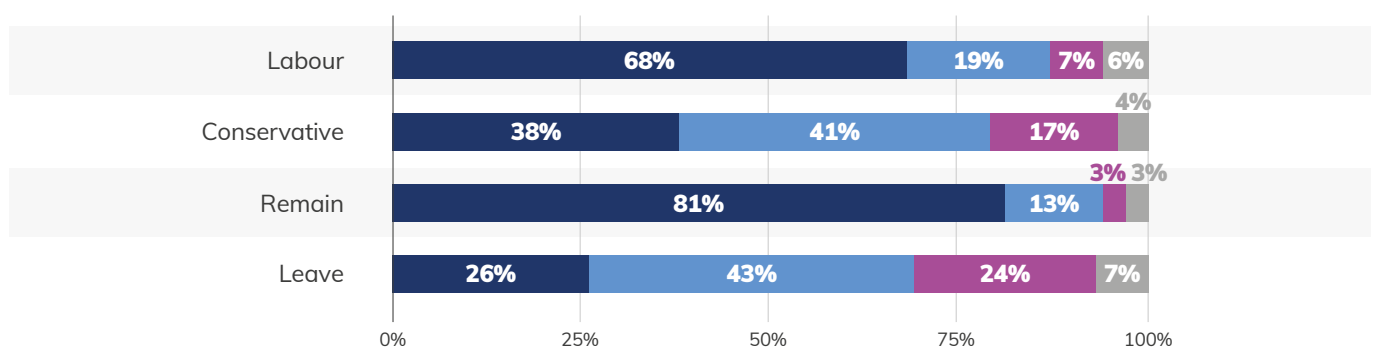
**Figure 5.2: Would you like to see a closer, or more distant relationship than we currently have between the UK and the European Union, or would you like the relationship to stay the same?**



As Figure 5.3 shows, there were clear differences between Leave and Remain supporters. However, only a quarter (24%) of Leave supporters would

like the relationship to be more distant than it currently is, and slightly more (26%) would like the relationship to be closer.

**Figure 5.3: Would you like to see a closer or more distant relationship than we currently have between the UK and the European Union, or would you like the relationship to stay the same?**



- A closer relationship between the UK and the European Union
- Keep the current relationship between the UK and the European Union
- A more distant relationship between the UK and the European Union
- Don't know



Findings by party political support show a preference among 68% of Labour supporters for a closer relationship. Conservative supporters are, by contrast, divided: 38% support closer ties, while a narrow plurality of 41% would keep the status quo, and 17% would seek a more distant connection to the EU.

This balance of views was expressed throughout the focus group discussions. Participants who had voted Remain almost all wanted to see a closer relationship, as did a majority of those who had not voted, or were too young to vote in the 2016 Referendum. Participants that voted Remain in 2016 had accepted the democratic result but retained their support for close political cooperation, free movement and a free trade agreement.

Participants who had voted Leave were comparatively split.

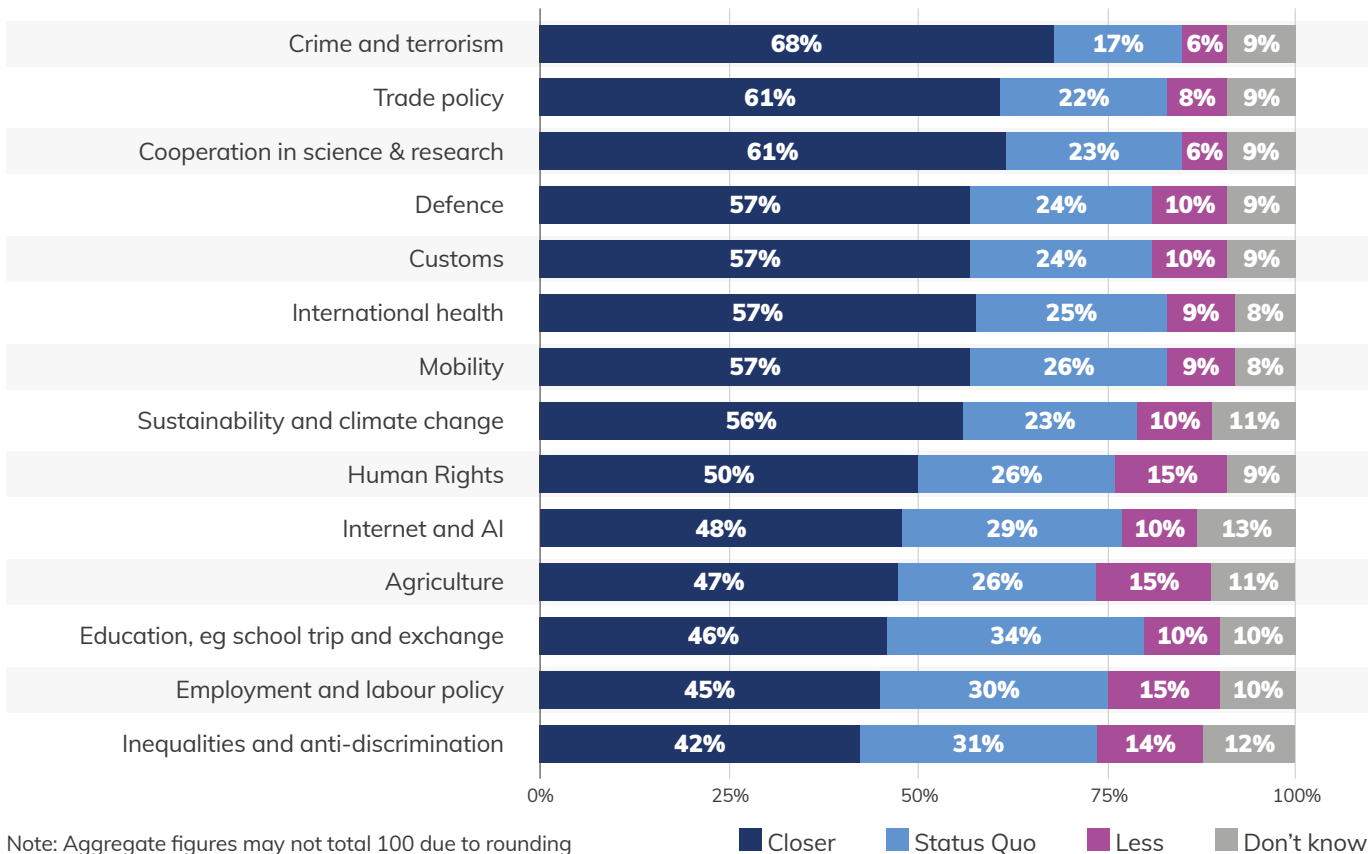
A plurality saw the UK as 'going through a transition phase' in the recent years following Brexit and were optimistic that the country should continue on this course, pursuing close relations with a wider range of global powers, such as the

USA, Commonwealth countries and Japan. This segment favoured having close economic ties with Europe, while balancing this with a preference for retaining UK independence from the EU on legislation and regulations.

A minority of Leave voters felt that 'Brexit hadn't properly happened'. This segment regularly cited that they felt too many UK 'red tape' laws and regulatory frameworks had been inherited from its time in the EU.

However, others who had voted Leave took a pragmatic approach and felt that the UK should pursue a closer relationship where this was seen to be 'mutually beneficial' for both sides. The group strongly supported closer economic ties with the EU, often citing that 'as a small nation, we can't afford to be picky and choose who we trade with.' This segment similarly regretted the impact of Brexit in certain areas of their life and livelihoods. They wanted to see fewer restrictions on their ability to travel and work abroad: with concerns about the introduction of new visa waiver forms, and on the post-Brexit restrictions on living abroad visa-free for over three months.

**Figure 5.4:** For each of these, please answer if you would want closer collaboration and co-operation with the European Union in this policy area, if you would want less collaboration and co-operation, or if you would keep the status quo as it currently is?



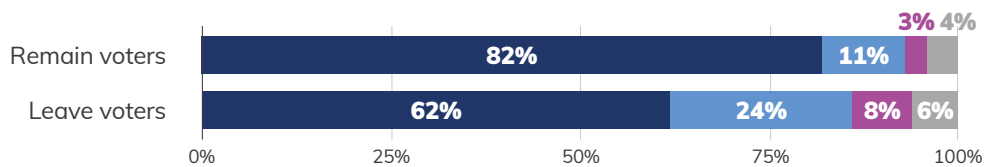
The national survey asked respondents whether they would like to see more or less collaboration with the EU across a range of policy areas, or if they would like to see a future UK-EU relationship maintain current levels of cooperation. As Figure 5.4 shows, there is support among a majority of respondents for closer collaboration on eight of the fourteen issues polled.

Support was strongest by some distance for cooperation on international crime and terrorism, for example combating trafficking in human beings and firearms, at 68%. A majority among

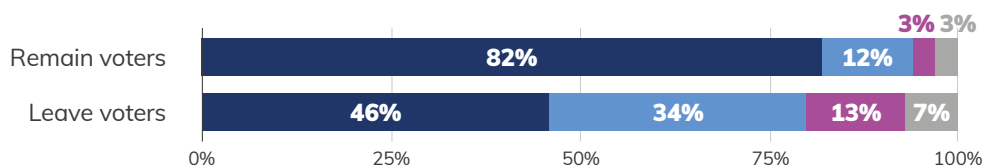
both Remain voters (82%) and Leave voters (62%) would prefer to see closer collaboration with the EU, as would a majority of respondents intending to vote both Conservative (70%) and Labour (75%) at the next election.

Across all issues polled, support for collaboration among Leave voters was expectedly lower. Yet a number of the policy areas showed latent consensus for closer cooperation among a substantial plurality of leave voters: trade, science and research defence, customs, health and climate change policy (see below).

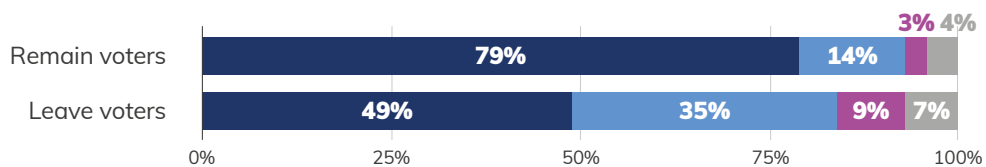
**International crime and terrorism**  
(for example combatting trafficking in human beings and firearms)



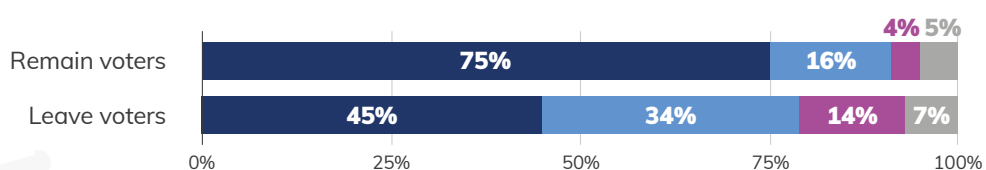
**Trade policy**  
(for example a trade agreement between the UK and the European Union)



**International cooperation on science and research**



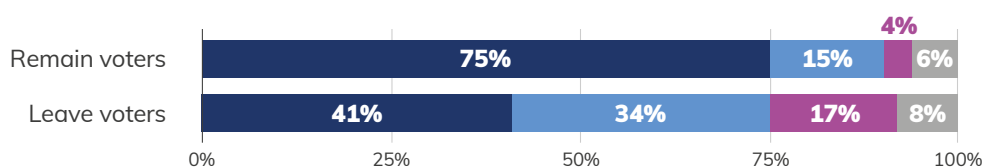
**Defence**  
(for example the response to the war between Russia and Ukraine)



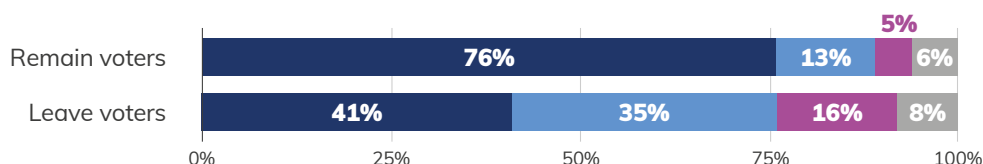
■ Closer   ■ Status Quo   ■ Less   ■ Don't know



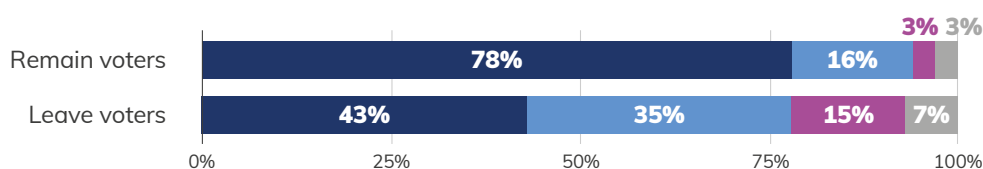
**Sustainability and climate change**  
(for example achieving 'Net Zero' climate targets)



**Customs**  
(for example tariffs on imported and exported goods)



**International health**  
(for example vaccine procurement and responses to tackle infectious disease)



■ Closer ■ Status Quo ■ Less ■ Don't know



The focus group discussions found similar preferences for policy areas where a closer UK-EU relationship was seen to be beneficial, with participants explaining why. A number of the groups expressed support for collaboration on science and research: in particular, Remain and Leave voters were both keen to see the UK rejoin the EU's Horizon programme around the time of ongoing negotiations to re-enter the scheme. Others cited the importance of working together with European partners to develop emerging technologies: such as on space exploration and climate change.

Many of the groups also showed strong support for the UK working with the EU on defence issues, notably in its response to the Ukraine war. Some Leave voters voiced concerns about news reports of the EU developing a European Army. Yet broadly the focus group participants expressed a sense of solidarity with the EU for its opposition to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and felt that the UK should play a close role in working with the EU to support Ukraine's defence.

In other areas of the research, views on closer ties with the EU were more divided. Only 28% of Leave supporters were in favour of closer collaboration on human rights and 63% would like to see less collaboration or to keep the status quo. This response may be explained by a misperception among respondents that the question refers to the European Convention on Human Rights, established in the early 1950s to protect human rights and political freedoms in Europe. Throughout the focus group discussions, participants tended to confuse the role of the EU and ECHR in the context of ongoing Conservative Party discussions over whether the UK should leave the Convention. A poll by YouGov in 2023 found almost half of respondents (48%) supported remaining in the ECHR and 20% supported withdrawing, again with 28% of Leave voters in favour of staying in, compared to 71% of Remain supporters.<sup>(26)</sup>

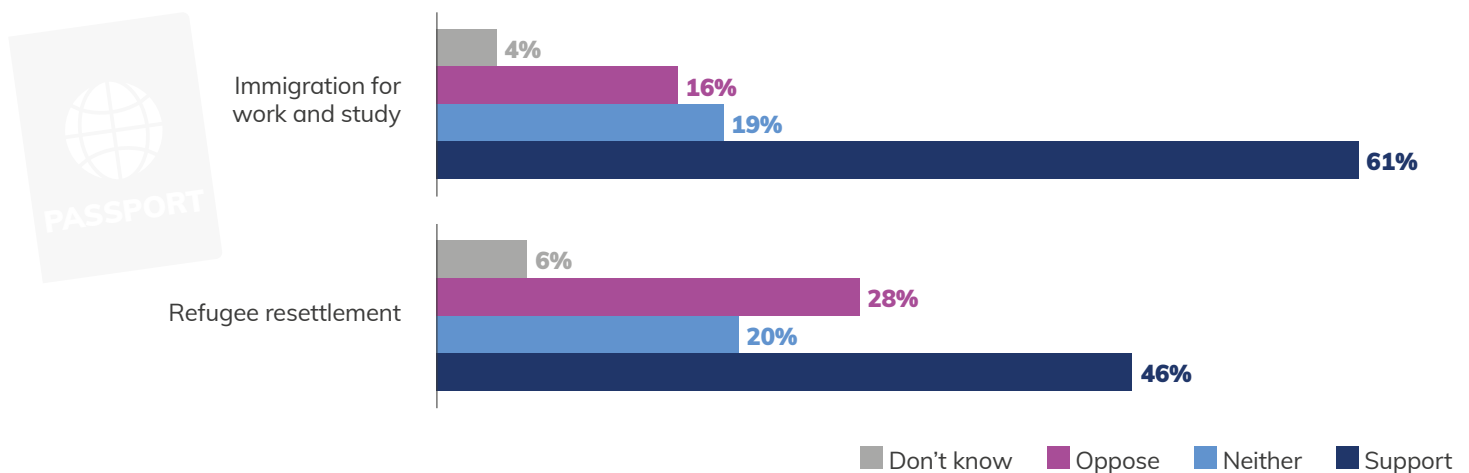
Policy areas with minority support for closer collaboration are Internet and AI, agriculture, education, employment and inequalities. On each of these policy areas there is more support

(26) <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2023/02/28/how-leading-questions-and-acquiescence-bias-can-im>

for collaboration from younger than from older respondents and, as would be expected, from Remain than Leave supporters. Collaboration on education is more strongly supported by graduates (51%) than non graduates (41%), which may be explained by their greater awareness of Erasmus and Turing exchange schemes. Finally, collaboration over inequalities

and anti-discrimination is more strongly supported by younger people, graduates and by respondents from ethnic minority backgrounds. Remain supporters are considerably more in favour of closer collaboration on this issue than Leave supporters, by 64% compared to 21%, as are Labour supporters (59%) compared to Conservative supporters (27%).

**Figure 5.5: On each of the issues below, to what extent would you support or oppose closer collaboration and co-operation between the UK and the European Union?**



The survey also asked respondents whether they would support or oppose closer collaboration with the EU on immigration for work and study and on refugee resettlement. As Figure 5.5 shows, respondents were more likely to support collaboration on immigration policies for work and study (61%) than refugee policies (46%).

There is majority support from both Labour supporters (72%) and Conservative supporters (54%) for closer collaboration and cooperation around immigration for work and study.<sup>(27)</sup> This does not necessarily indicate a shift in support for free movement, as new immigration policies could take a variety of potential forms. However, the issue does not appear to be as divisive among Leave and Remain voters compared with debates during the period of the Referendum.

Remain voters were more likely to support closer cooperation on immigration policy (78%), yet almost half of Leave voters (46%) were also in favour of stronger collaboration: just 28% were opposed. This was reflected in the focus groups, where participants shared nuanced views about wanting to see flexibilities in migration policy from EU countries. Many participants – both Leave and Remain voters – either knew friends and family who had moved to the EU or were considering moving themselves, for example to retire, and wanted to see flexibilities in policy that would allow people in the UK to travel to EU states for over three months without requiring a visa.

The groups also held balanced views on how they would like to see collaboration with the EU on migration for work. In particular, many voiced support for policies to promote EU migration that addressed labour market shortages: with

(27) The survey also asked participants in a separate question about mobility policies with the EU (for example policies that make it easier for people to travel between the UK and the EU, and vice versa), asking whether they would like to see closer UK-EU cooperation, less cooperation, or would keep the status quo. Most of the respondents (57%) supported closer collaboration on mobility; however, this was more divided dependent on a person's 2016 referendum vote. A strong majority (78%) of Remain voters surveyed support cooperation on mobility policies. However, this was split among Leave voters, of whom 38% support closer collaboration, while 41% support the status quo. EU stakeholders may wish to review how they communicate on policies and values around refugee policy to help promote public awareness and tackle misperceptions, and to increase understanding of the distinct roles of different European institutions in human rights and refugee resettlement.

several groups concerned about difficulties in the UK recruiting lorry drivers, care workers and NHS staff, agricultural workers and staff in the hospitality industry.

By contrast, there were larger differences between 2016 Leave and Remain voters on the issue of cooperation on refugee resettlement. More than twice as many Remain voters (64%) support cooperation on refugee policy than Leave voters (31%), while 45% of Leave voters were opposed to UK-EU collaboration. Views on this response were closely related to participants' broader immigration attitudes. Using British Future's attitudinal segmentation,<sup>(28)</sup> 78% of migration liberals support closer collaboration on refugee resettlement, compared to 45% support among migration balancers and just 20% support among migration sceptics.

Refugee policies emerged as a salient and contested theme throughout many of the focus group discussions. When asked where they would like to see cooperation between the UK and the EU, many said that the UK should seek to cooperate with neighbouring countries including France and Mediterranean partners to help tackle the trafficking gangs sending people seeking asylum to Europe on boats. Those who voted Remain tended to cite reasons of concern for the welfare of those crossing the seas and stressed the importance of implementing safe routes. Leave voters often agreed with these sentiments but also voiced concerns about the numbers of people seeking asylum crossing the Channel to the UK, expressing a preference for stronger border control.

*"I think with immigration, the Brexit result rubbed off onto us, because I don't think that we have many agreements with France. Whereas if we were in the European Union, there would be more cooperation with France about refugees."* – Focus group participant, Ealing.

*"We need to all be working on it together, as everyone just seems to be following a different approach. [...] It feels like other countries are wanting to wash their hands of the issue. So I think there needs to be a more reciprocal approach."* – Focus group participant, Stockport.

Many participants felt that the UK should work with countries in the EU to reach agreements on the dispersal and resettlement of people seeking asylum, although differing views were often the subject of lively debate in the group discussions. Some expressed a view that they wanted to see negotiations with France and other EU states to 'take their fair share' of people seeking asylum, however this was challenged by migration liberals who noted that the UK resettled comparatively few refugees to many countries in continental Europe.

In a number of discussions, participants also shared misperceptions that the EU was obstructing UK government policy on asylum – for example to send people seeking asylum to Rwanda. There was very limited understanding of the differences between the EU and the ECHR, which may partly account for the degree of opposition to UK-EU cooperation on resettlement in the survey. As one focus group participant noted:

*"There's always those headlines that come out, where they're like 'EU law prevents Rwanda plan from happening' – that always triggers a conversation [with my friends] for probably a week."* – Focus group participant, Ealing, discussing confusion between the ECHR and the EU.

EU stakeholders may wish to review how they communicate on policies and values around refugee policy to help promote public awareness and tackle misperceptions, and to increase understanding of the distinct roles of different European institutions in human rights and refugee resettlement.

(28) Based on a 1-10 scale where 1-10 (with 1 being very negative and 10 being very positive), respondents are asked 'do you feel that immigration has had a positive or negative impact on the UK, including your local community?' Migration liberals comprise the 8-10 segment, migration sceptics the 1-3 segment, and migration balancers fall in between with 4-7 scores, seeing both pressures and gains to immigration.



## 6. Engaging with the EU through events and schemes

Exchange programmes and town twinning between the UK and EU member states have traditionally provided one of the major opportunities to forge social connections and strengthen shared European values. The benefits of these initiatives are at risk by a post-Brexit decline in the number of exchanges undertaken between the UK and the EU. There has been a particular decline in the number of school trips from the UK to EU countries after 2020, where organisers have reported that post-Brexit travel regulations are creating additional barriers for students.<sup>(29)(30)</sup>

Participation in exchange programmes has also been impacted by the UK's withdrawal from

Erasmus+. Prior to 2020, the Erasmus+ scheme was a popular programme among young people in the UK: for school pupils and students in further and higher education.<sup>(31)</sup>

In 2021 the Government decided to withdraw from the programme and establish a UK-based exchange initiative, the Turing scheme. This new scheme has a number of similarities with Erasmus and engages young people in the same categories of formal education. However, the funding structure is different, with no built-in reciprocity of support and a reduction in the funding support offered.<sup>(32)</sup> One consequence is that a lower proportion of trips are taking place within the UK compared to the Erasmus programme.

**Figure 6.1: Higher Education student exchanges under Erasmus+ compared to the Turing Scheme<sup>(33)</sup>**

Scheme	To EU countries	To non-EU countries
Erasmus+ Higher Education student mobility: outgoing UK students (2018/19 academic year)	18,100	300
Turing scheme Higher Education student mobility: outgoing UK students (2022/23 academic year)	8,600	14,900

Outside of formal education, a number of smaller, alternative cultural exchange programmes exist that cater to a variety of interests and needs. Many of these are targeted at young people; from sports exchange programmes through to skills development courses. Some are also designed for professional development for people in the UK and Europe working in a particular career, for example healthcare.<sup>(34)</sup>

Town twinning involves partnerships between two or more towns, cities or villages in Europe.

The concept first emerged after the Second World War as a means to nurture reconciliation, co-operation and closer European social connections. However, since then, thousands of partnerships have been formed.

Few studies have explored the overall number of twinning arrangements in the UK and limited data exists to evaluate their effectiveness in building UK/EU shared values. However, existing research points toward an ongoing decline in the activities being organised in twinning arrangements.<sup>(35)</sup>

(29) Based on a survey of 235 European youth group travel operators who send groups of children under the age of 18 to the UK. "The 235 operators that took part in the survey account for 524,000 student visitors, which is 44% of the total number of students travelling to the UK as part of a group led by a teacher or supervisor." Tourism Alliance (2022) Student Group Travel Results Survey. <https://beam-org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Student-Travel-Group-Research-June-2022.pdf>

(30) Other factors, including, new administrative safeguarding policies may have contributed to the decline in school trips and exchanges.

(31) Erasmus+ (2019) Annual Report 2019 Statistical Annex

(32) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/erasmus-study-exchange-scheme-tuition-travel>

(33) Figures rounded to the nearest 100. Erasmus+ data: [http://sepie.es/doc/comunicacion/publicaciones/NCAR20101ENN\\_anexo\\_en.pdf](http://sepie.es/doc/comunicacion/publicaciones/NCAR20101ENN_anexo_en.pdf); Turing data: <https://www.turing-scheme.org.uk/funding-opportunities/funding-results/>

(34) See also the list of programmes available at <https://culturalfoundation.eu/stories/brexit-and-a-cultural-way-forward-together/>

(35) Ryan, H and Mazzilli, C (2021) 'Debating the value of twinning in the United Kingdom: the need for a broader perspective'

## Awareness of exchange programmes

Our survey looked at the extent to which people engage with events and schemes that bring them into contact with EU nations and citizens. We asked specifically about twinning, educational exchanges and professional exchanges.

### Twinning

Of all of the types of engagement covered by our survey, twinning arrangements between villages, towns and cities in the UK and European states was the most widely known (75%). Older respondents aged 65+ were much more likely to be aware of twinning schemes (83%) than younger people aged 18-24 (59%). Awareness is also lower in London (65%) than other regions in England, and Scotland (79%) and Wales (73%).

While most people in the UK had heard of twinning as a concept, only 15% of respondents said they were both aware of the scheme and had opportunities to take part. These findings are likely to reflect the decline of twinning arrangements in recent years.

Many focus group participants had limited awareness of town twinning. Where they had, this came largely through seeing commemorative road signs and landmarks, such as city streets named after twinned locations. Of more than 90 participants, only four people had taken part in activities organised through twinning programmes and most cited that these exchanges had taken place decades ago. Some felt that programmes had largely involved civic leaders rather than the community. There was a common feeling that opportunities had dried up in recent years.

When asked, focus group participants often showed an interest to take part in twinning schemes. However, a view shared among participants across multiple groups was that opportunities should be made open and accessible to all. Several older participants felt that twinning exchanges were largely enjoyed by 'enclosed committees' and employees of the local councils and were not publicised or made widely available.

*"I think there's a lot of confusion between Brexit, and then still remaining in Europe as a continent. We're still part of Europe. And I think it's really important that we still recognise that and celebrate that. It's not all or nothing. But then all of these things like the town twinning and the exchanges, I don't know about any of these. So, I guess these things would need to be celebrated on another level, if we wanted to create that connection day to day."* – Focus group participant, Peterborough.

### Education exchanges

The survey research also shows strong awareness of educational exchanges, with 61% of respondents aware of available schemes, though only 11% said they had the opportunity to take part. Surprisingly, awareness of schemes was low among young people, with fewer than a quarter (24%) of 18-24 year olds both aware of exchange programmes and having opportunities to take part. A third (33%) were not aware of schemes and did not have opportunities. Awareness and opportunities were higher among graduates and among A, B and C1 socioeconomic groups.

Participants in the focus groups were most likely to name the Erasmus scheme when asked about their awareness of educational exchanges and the majority of those aware held positive views of the programme. Those who had taken part, or knew friends who had participated, widely felt that Erasmus exchanges had helped university students to build long lasting friendships – many of which had lasted years later.

*"My daughter was involved in Erasmus. And it was funded by a grant that came from the EU. [...] She's still in touch with people she met when she was a teenager, and they still meet up in Europe every year. It had such a massive effect on her life, her education, it made her realise that the world is a big place."* – Focus group participant, Peterborough.

Several younger participants, and parents of students, in the discussions shared how opportunities to take part in Erasmus had been impacted by the UK's withdrawal from the EU: through cancelled trips or through the introduction of new visa fees that had made their participation

more difficult. Where such experiences were shared, other participants – including both Remain and Leave voters – reflected that they felt Brexit should not have led to the UK's withdrawal from the programme and that they would be supportive of rejoining the scheme.

The focus group participants showed comparatively less awareness of the new global Turing exchange scheme, likely reflecting that it has only been operational since 2021. A small number of participants noted the scheme but reported first and second-hand experiences with teething problems. These included students not being given clear information on what support they would be entitled to on exchanges when signing up.

Focus group participants also showed general awareness of school exchange programmes, albeit less frequently than university-based exchange initiatives. Similarly, there was a broad appetite to see the UK continue to offer these opportunities beyond Brexit and into the future. Those of all ages who had participated or seen family members take part noted the benefits of learning about another culture and strengthening language skills.

*“It was a really good way for me to get to know another language and I loved seeing the culture. I’ve always got that bond, now, with Germany.”* – Focus group participant, Stockport, reflecting on their experience in a school exchange as a teenager.

### **Professional exchanges**

Awareness of professional exchange programmes was somewhat lower than of educational schemes at 54% of survey respondents, with 10% saying they had the opportunity to take part. The focus groups included several participants who had participated in or had opportunities to engage

with a mix of programmes. These included the NHS HOPE exchange, language assistant, au pair and engineering based vocational exchanges. Similarly to other exchange programmes, these were viewed positively, including from people in the UK who had met and mixed with exchange participants travelling from other European countries. The exchanges were seen as an opportunity for adults outside of formal education to access opportunities to travel and experience other cultures.

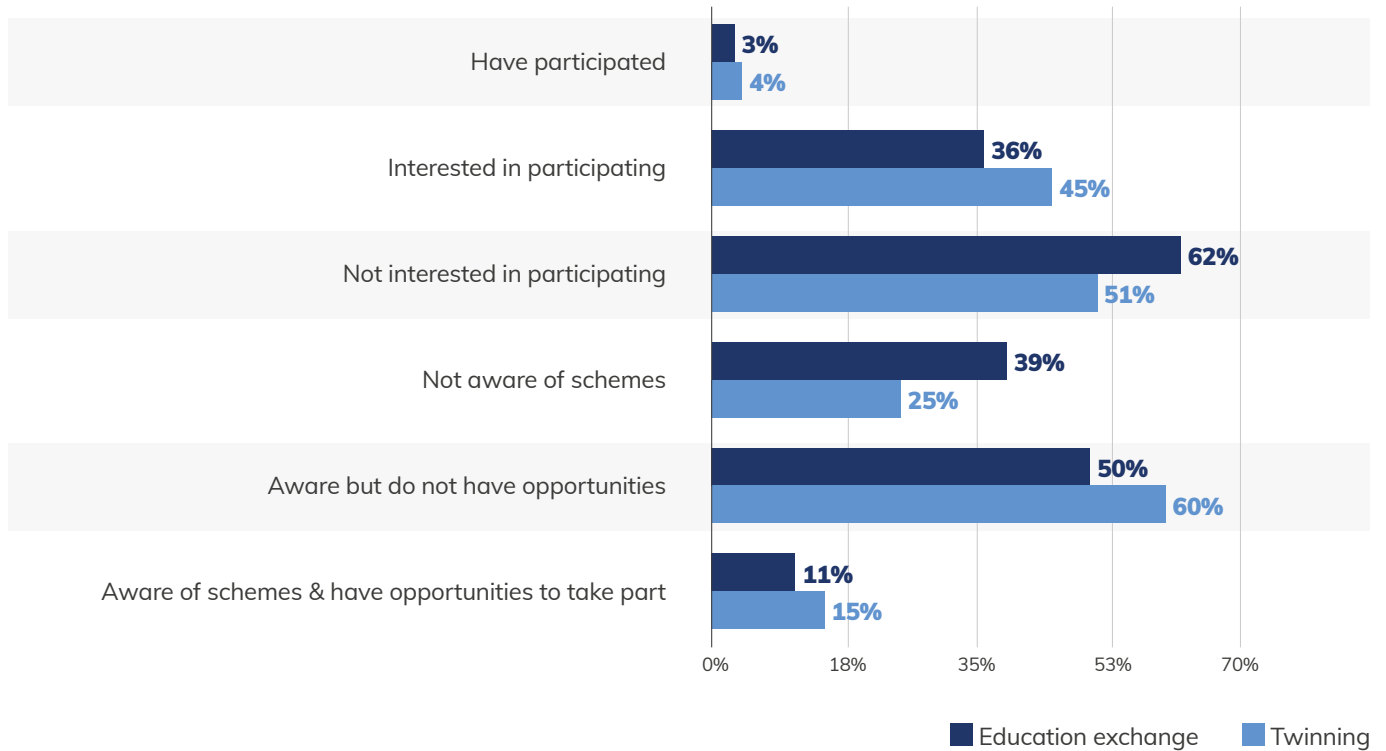
### **Participation and interest in exchange and twinning initiatives**

The national survey looked at direct participation and at levels of interest in participating in twinning and educational exchanges. Very few respondents had taken part, with only 4% taking part in twinning and 3% in educational exchanges. However, a wider 45% of those surveyed were interested in opportunities to engage in twinning exchanges, while 36% were interested in educational exchanges. Interest in both is consistently stronger among Remain and Labour supporters as well as those with social contact with EU citizens.

Younger people have a stronger appetite for twinning opportunities than older respondents: just over half of those aged 18-34 showed an interest in participating, compared to one in three aged over 65. This may reflect that younger respondents were less likely than older participants to hold the view of twinning initiatives as closed-off for council employees and committee members. Those in government, local authorities and the EU may wish to consider how to mobilise this interest to find ways of re-energising and rebranding twinning, and to address concerns among older groups through offering a broader, more inclusive range of opportunities for cultural exchange.



**Figure 6.2: Awareness and participation in educational exchanges and twinning programmes**



A majority (55%) of participants aged 18-24 and 50% of those aged 25-34 were interested in taking part in educational exchange programmes. Interest in partaking in twinning initiatives was also considerably stronger among younger respondents (54% of 18-24 year olds) compared to older groups (33% of over-65s). However, participants in our focus groups noted that costs of educational exchanges played an important role in their interest in the schemes, and noted that offers should be inclusive for people from low-income backgrounds.

*“For me, it would need to be an equal opportunity for everyone if it was going to be done. Where I grew up, I never went on a school trip, I never would have been able to do these [university] schemes, I wouldn’t have been able to afford it.” – Focus group participant, Peterborough.*

**Other opportunities for European exchange, identity and contact**

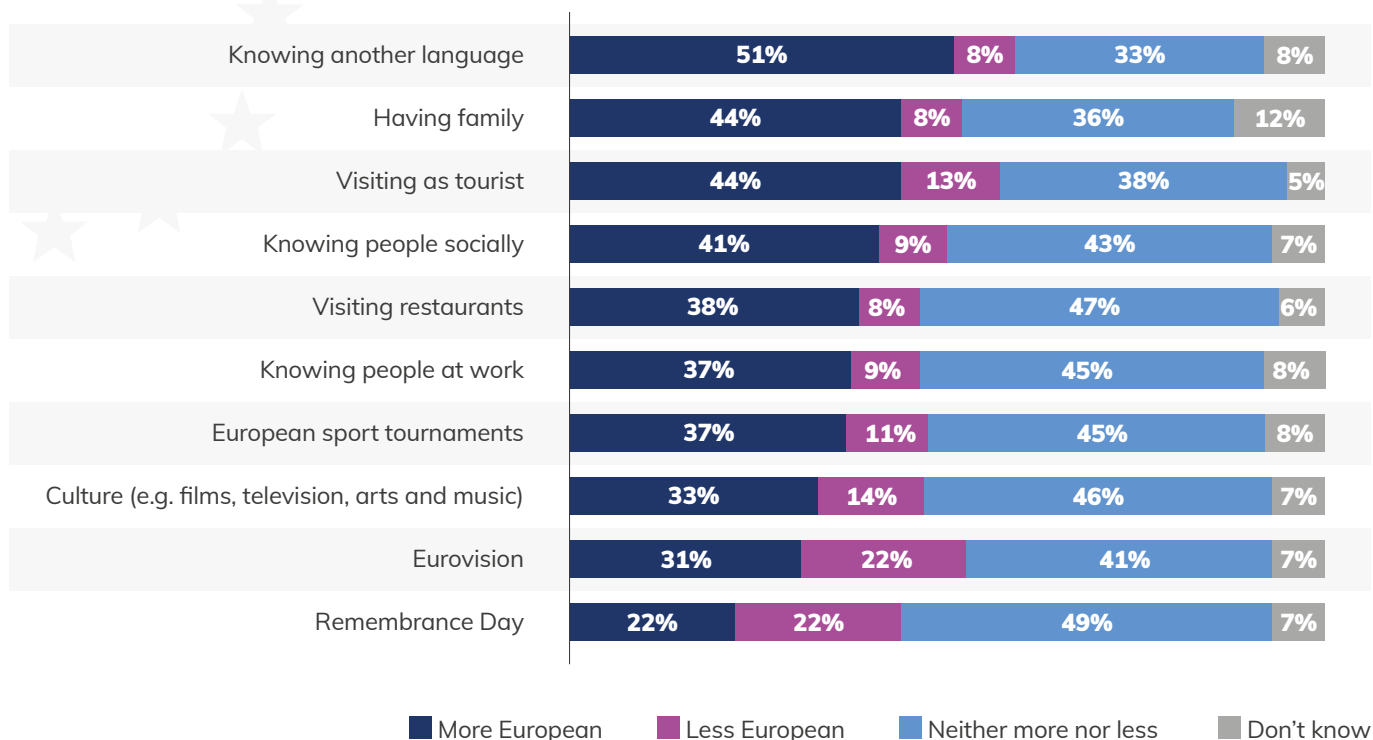
We asked survey respondents about what other experiences and events made them feel more European, from a list including social and

cultural activities, European tournaments and social contact with EU citizens.

As Figure 6.3 shows, knowing another language was the activity which made respondents feel more European (51%) followed by having family from another European country (44%). While a majority of the respondents did not speak a European language or have family relatives from European countries, the results nonetheless point towards shared language and a sense of family connection to the continent as important in public conceptions of European identity.

These were followed by other forms of social contact, including visiting as a tourist and knowing EU citizens socially. More than four in ten respondents said these made them feel more European. Remain voters were more likely (59%) than Leave voters (34%) to feel European when travelling on holiday. Lower socioeconomic groups C2DE were slightly less likely (38%) to say that travelling as a tourist made them feel European, compared to respondents in ABC1 (49%), likely reflecting differences in opportunities to travel abroad; yet nonetheless this was still cited among the main factors most likely to let them feel European.

**Figure 6.3: To what extent does each of the following make you feel more or less European?**



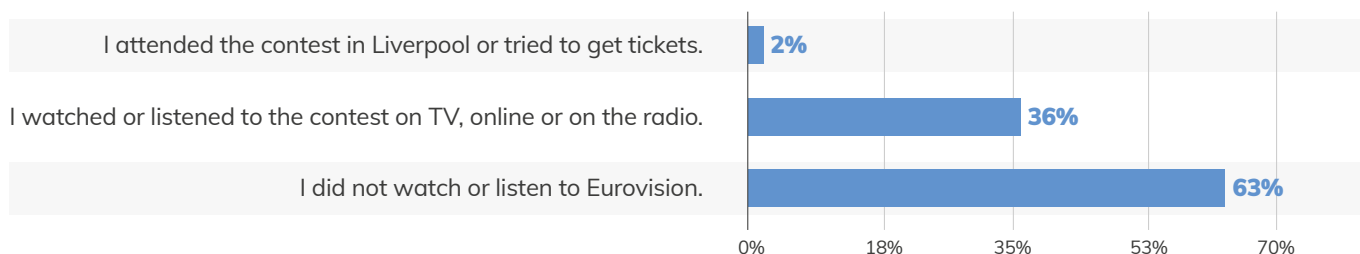
Note: Aggregate figures may not total 100 due to rounding

Engagement in activities that do not involve direct, in-person social contact, for example sport tournaments and Eurovision (largely followed on television or online) were comparatively less likely to make people feel European.

Just over a third of respondents said that they had watched or listened to Eurovision this year. Engagement was consistent across age groups

and among those with little or no social contact with European citizens, as well as Leave voters. However, focus group participants noted that the tournament had little or no bearing on their sense of feeling 'a part of Europe'. Fans were more likely to enjoy watching with a sense of cynicism about the UK's chances of success (or lack of) but felt frustrated at the more political factors driving the panel-based judging.

**Figure 6.4: This year the UK hosted the Eurovision song contest. Please say which of the following statements applies most to you.**



Similarly, many of the focus group participants were following sports tournaments from the Euros to the Rugby Six Nations, but most felt that this reinforced their national identity rather than an a sense of closeness to other European countries. Even among highly engaged sports

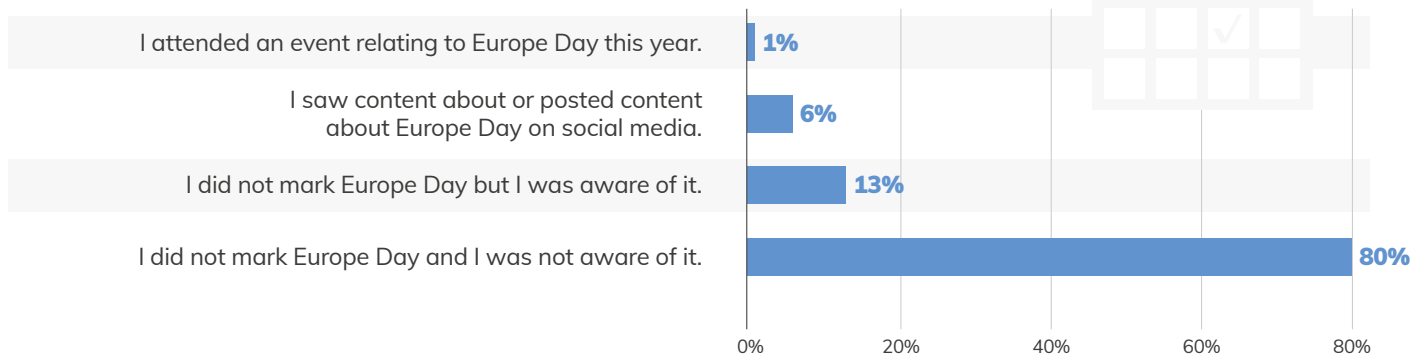
fans in the discussion, who had travelled within the EU to attend matches or games, participants stressed a sense of pride in their team and country and attributed little importance to being in a tournament with other European nations. Where participants shared experiences of social contact

with fans of other countries, people tended to speak of finding common ground over a mutual respect of one another's sense of national or sport-based pride.

Europe Day is an annual celebration, led by the EU and European Council, which takes place on the 9<sup>th</sup> May to celebrate peace and unity across Europe. The day is marked by celebrations in a number of EU states, including a public holiday for some countries. However, our survey found

limited awareness of the occasion in the UK, with 80% not aware of the annual day. Around one in eight (13%) were aware of Europe Day as a concept and correctly answered a follow-up question on which month the occasion is celebrated, with awareness stronger among those who had been born outside the UK in an EU member state, or who had lived in another EU country for over a year (21%). However, only 6% had seen content about Europe Day on social media.

**Figure 6.5: Europe Day: Which of the following applies most closely to you?**



## 7. Conclusions and potential policy implications

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The research findings in this report demonstrate that there has been a positive shift in attitudes towards cooperating with the EU in recent years. Whereas debates about the future UK-EU relationship were once fiercely contested and polarised topics of discussion in the UK, much of this heat has gone out of the debate in the years following a final withdrawal agreement. Those on all sides of public opinion are now likely to balance a plurality of views: on how to engage in a cooperative relationship with the EU along lines of mutual benefit, while respecting the result of the referendum.

Public attitudes between Leave and Remain voters still continue to diverge in many of the areas explored, including on the importance of the UK-EU relationship relative to other bilateral relationships with the USA and countries in the Commonwealth. However, this report

illuminates a number of potential areas with latent consensus across broad sections of the public: spanning 2016 Remain voters, Leave voters and those who did not participate in the referendum, or were too young to vote. The following conclusions provide suggestions on how policymakers can engage with these as starting points, to mobilise public consent in forging a future UK-EU relationship.

Reflecting the framing and objectives of the wider project within which our research is based, our conclusions moreover consider the broader themes of European identity and relationships explored throughout the report. We provide suggestions on how organisations in policy and civil society can engage the public to constructively bridge divides between UK and EU citizens, bringing people together to highlight shared interests and common ground.

### A. UK-EU Relations – Future Policy Frameworks

#### 1. There is significant UK public appetite for greater cooperation

There is public support among just over half (52%) of adults in the UK for a closer political relationship with the EU, while only 12% would prefer a more distant approach.

Public attitudes on the UK-EU relationship have grown nuanced and balanced since Brexit, but not across all areas of policy. Our research highlights some areas of increasing support for cooperation, alongside others that remain politically divisive and polarised.

Stakeholders working on the UK-EU relationship should build closer relations from starting points on specific issues where there is broad support across people of different political allegiance: across Leave and Remain divides, and from those

who did not vote in 2016, as well as across party political supporters. Our survey polling and focus group discussions highlighted that key areas of broadest support for closer EU cooperation and collaboration include:

- International crime and terrorism (e.g. combating trafficking in human beings and firearms)
- Trade policy
- International cooperation on science and research
- Sustainability and climate policy (e.g. cooperation to hit 'Net Zero' emissions targets)
- Customs policy (to reduce tariffs on imports and exports)
- International health policy (e.g. vaccine procurement and responses to tackle infectious disease)

## 2. Shared interests have considerably more resonance and reach than shared values

While the years following the UK's official withdrawal from the EU have seen growing support for collaboration, this is currently viewed through a pragmatic, issues-based lens, grounded in a public appetite to pursue closer ties on areas of mutually beneficial interests of the UK and EU. In the short and medium term, policymakers and stakeholders working on developing the future relationship should centre their approach and communications in this frame, emphasising specific political areas of collaboration and the shared gains of cooperation.

This approach is likely to yield more reward with fewer risks than an approach themed around European values or identity, which has less resonance with the UK public and a higher

likelihood of reigniting polarisation. Indeed, feelings of European identity and belonging are relatively weak across most of the public and identity-focused campaigns will be unlikely to gain traction.

Notions of commonality with continental Europe based on a set of shared political values also do not have reach with the public. Rather, the focus group research highlights that the public often struggles to understand and engage with abstract principles of political values, or to view these as common foundations for UK-EU relations. Meanwhile the survey research finds that the British public have difficulty identifying values as distinctly relating to Europe or the EU.

## 3. Bringing shared values to life

Different stakeholders may be interested in pursuing both 'shared interests' and 'shared values' strategies to strengthening UK-EU relations over the longer term. If so, these should look to build public recognition and awareness of commonality through demonstrating concrete examples of values in action within joint working. These might include, for example, collaboration on human trafficking and international drugs smuggling. Cooperation on such issues could highlight a shared value of upholding the rule of law. Collaboration on the world stage

to strengthen and protect human rights laws can similarly provide a route to communicate shared commitments to individual liberty.

An approach that engages with themes of shared values, particularly through the frame of European identity, should be careful not to trigger polarisation across political party support, social class and generations. Some 70% of 2016 Leave voters report not 'feeling European', as do 60% of Conservative supporters.<sup>(36)</sup>

## 4. Strengthen public awareness of the EU's role on more contested areas: particularly on migration and refugee policies and human rights

Our focus group discussions found misperceptions conflating the role of the EU and ECHR in influencing UK policy on refugee resettlement and human rights, particularly in debates around the deportation of people seeking asylum to Rwanda. This likely accounts for the greater polarisation, by attitudes to Brexit and to immigration, on attitudes shown in our survey on UK-EU cooperation on refugee and human rights.

On the other hand, participants in our focus groups demonstrated broad agreement and

appetite – spanning Leave and Remain voters, migration liberals and migration sceptics – for cooperation between the UK and the EU on responses to trafficking gangs and to dangerous sea crossings made by people seeking asylum.

It is important for the EU to clearly and accessibly communicate its values and its role in international policy of refugee safety, resettlement and wider human rights issues, to raise awareness and understanding of its particular mandate and the role of specific European institutions.

(36) Answering between 1-4 on the question, 'On a scale of 0-10, to what extent do you identify as European? (1 = Do not identify as European at all).



## 5. Choices to engage with/avoid political polarisation

The UK's future relationship with the EU is not fully determined and is likely to change in coming years. A significantly closer relationship outside the European Union – particularly single market membership, through the EEA or similar arrangements – would involve major political arguments as well as big public policy choices. What this report highlights is a significant potential space in UK public attitudes for an approach

to future collaboration that is more gradualist, nuanced and does not revive 2016 divisions. How far that is of practicable use in future UK-EU negotiations is unknown. It may be that only bigger political decisions will lead to a much closer relationship. Currently, as public attitudes stand, the research indicates that collaborations that are issue-specific and pragmatic can help defuse Brexit identities and achieve wider public support.

## B. UK-EU Relations – People to People Connections

### 1. Strengthen pan-European connections through shared interests

Pan-European identities and feelings of belonging are not strongly held by most of the UK public, even among many Remain voters and those who previously lived in another EU state. However, this was not seen as a necessary condition by focus group participants for forging connections with EU citizens. Discussions highlighted that as a result of free movement, people see contact with European neighbours and colleagues as part of everyday life. Many also have family members who were born in an EU member state. In areas where day-to-day contact with EU citizens in the UK is lower, participants who had engaged in exchange initiatives, or lived abroad, reflected on lasting impressions of meeting and mixing with people in other EU states.

Our focus group discussions indicate that initiatives to promote social contact with EU citizens (in the UK and citizens internationally)

would be most effective if structured around bringing people together through shared interests, including studies or professions, rather than shared identities. This may in the longer term provide one route to stronger perceptions of common identity. However this will depend on facilitating contact widely across groups in society. This should include people less likely to travel abroad, or to have opportunities for mixing with EU citizens locally.

Facilitated exchange programmes to provide contact with EU citizens overseas can also help to dispel assumptions among UK citizens about 'how they view us' abroad, raised by focus group participants as a concern following the Brexit process. Exchanges that facilitate traveling to EU countries and hosting EU citizens, in particular, can help to form closer connections, reducing tensions and tackling 'them and us' perceptions.

### 2. Reduce barriers to educational exchanges

Young people hold the most positive views toward a future UK-EU relationship, but fewer currently have opportunities for school trips and exchanges to visit EU countries and form connections. Stakeholder organisations engaging in strengthening UK and EU ties should consider routes to boosting educational trips

at all age levels, for example through waiving visa requirements for school trips. Similarly, both UK and EU stakeholders should come back to the table to renegotiate on improved funding arrangements for EU higher education exchanges, even within the branding of the new Turing Scheme.

### 3. Broaden the age, social class, and education basis of exchange opportunities

The UK and the EU should, in parallel, seek to offer wider opportunities for cultural exchange that go beyond graduate groups and offer accessible opportunities to people of all ages and socioeconomic groups.

#### Redesigning and re-energising twinning

Twinning was largely seen as a programme of the past in focus group discussions, and survey research finds that just 15% of adults have opportunities to get involved in twinning initiatives. However, polling also shows that a significant portion (45%) of the public would be interested in getting involved if twinning activities were made available and accessible. The UK and EU, in partnership with local councils and civic organisations, should explore this opportunity to re-energise twinning.

This should consider different models which can look at what would help strengthen connections between UK and EU citizens in a contemporary world where international travel and social contact become more common, but where opportunities are unevenly distributed by socio-economic and educational groups.

- Future funding opportunities could be targeted in the councils (or wards) with lower populations of EU citizens and hence fewer opportunities for social contact.
- Funding should be maximised to support free or reduced-cost opportunities for low-income

residents who otherwise would have fewer opportunities for international travel.

- Closer engagement with local sports clubs, faith and community groups could help widen exchange opportunities beyond schools and higher education institutions.

Reviving twinning programmes also needs to take account of a more negative reputation among older people. Future programmes could include consultation activities between UK and EU local authorities, engaging residents of different ages, backgrounds and interests to understand what exchange activities would be engaging to them, and how these can be made accessible and inclusive. Co-designed initiatives could also explore interest in revitalising twinning partnerships around local responses to international issues of shared interest: engaging schools and residents from across different countries in environmental sustainability projects.

#### Increase professional exchange opportunities

Throughout the focus groups, professional exchange programmes were found to be popular among participants who took part, or who knew of others that participated. The UK and EU could jointly fund or incentivise new schemes for businesses and public sector organisations to offer exchange trips with counterparts in other countries, to enable knowledge-based and cultural exchange. Flexibilities could be offered on travel to reduce barriers such as visas or visa waivers.

# Appendix: Notes on Focus Group Locations

## Peterborough

Peterborough has a population of 216,000 but is one of the fastest growing cities in the UK, in part because of inward migration of EU citizens who arrived under free movement. There have been tensions in the city, although these have reduced somewhat in recent years and EU and UK citizens have integrated.

- Peterborough voted by 60.2% to leave the European Union in 2016, with 39.1% voting Remain.<sup>(37)</sup>
- 17.0% of residents in Peterborough hold an EU passport.
- Peterborough is predominantly white (75.4%), with non-white minorities comprising 24.6% of the population. The city has a young population with a median average age of 36.6 (compared with 40.7 for the UK as a whole).<sup>(38)</sup>
- Peterborough is ranked as the 71<sup>st</sup> most deprived local authority district out of a total of 326 nationally.<sup>(39)</sup>

## Ealing, London

London, with a population of 9 million, is the third largest city in Europe and accounts for almost one in six of the UK's population. It is also home to a high proportion of EU citizens who came over under free movement.

- Participants were recruited from the borough of Ealing. Ealing voted by a majority of 60.4% for Remain in the 2016 referendum.<sup>(40)</sup>
- Ealing has a large population of EU citizens: 16.6% hold an EU passport.<sup>(41)</sup>
- 43.2% of residents in Ealing identify as white British, with 56.8% identifying with other ethnicities.<sup>(42)</sup> The borough also has a young population with a median age of 35, similar to London as a whole but below the national median (40).
- As of 2019 Ealing is the 88<sup>th</sup> most deprived local authority in England (out of 326).<sup>(43)</sup>

## Stockport, Greater Manchester

Stockport is an industrial town in Greater Manchester, situated six miles east of Manchester City centre. Compared to the other two localities, its voting pattern in 2016 was neither strongly for 'Leave' nor 'Remain'.

- In 2016, Greater Manchester voted 60.4% to Remain in the EU; while suburbs further from the city such as Oldham voted in higher numbers to 'Leave' By comparison, voters in Stockport were more evenly split, with the area narrowly voting by 52.3% to Remain.<sup>(44)</sup>
- 2% of people in Stockport hold an EU passport, compared to 9.7% in Manchester, meaning that many residents have comparatively low social contact with EU citizens, although will be indirectly aware of contact 'down the road'.
- Stockport has a median age of 42.2, higher than the national average and the oldest in Greater Manchester.<sup>(45)</sup> The area is less ethnically diverse compared with the national population average: 87.4% of residents identified their ethnicity as white in the 2021 census, with 12.6% identifying as other ethnic groups.<sup>(46)</sup>
- Stockport is comparatively less deprived than the other two localities and ranked as the 178<sup>th</sup> most deprived LA out of 326 in the 2015 Index of Multiple Deprivation.<sup>(47)</sup>

(37) [https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/eu\\_referendum/results/local/p](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/eu_referendum/results/local/p)

(38) <https://www.varbes.com/demographics/peterborough-demographics>

(39) <https://democracy.peterborough.gov.uk/documents/s18403/7.%20Appendix%201%20-%20Tackling%20Poverty%20Strategy%20-%20COTISC%20-%2020131111.pdf>

(40) [https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/eu\\_referendum/results/local/b](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/eu_referendum/results/local/b)

(41) <https://data.brent.gov.uk/dataset/vqkrd/community-profile-evidence-pack>

(42) Ibid.

(43) [https://www.ealing.gov.uk/download/downloads/id/17842/population\\_characteristics\\_-\\_jsna\\_2021.pdf](https://www.ealing.gov.uk/download/downloads/id/17842/population_characteristics_-_jsna_2021.pdf)

(44) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36617781>

(45) <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/youngest-oldest-neighbourhoods-greater-manchester-25942216>

(46) <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censusareachanges/E08000007/>

(47) <http://www.stockportjsna.org.uk/2016-jsna-analysis/socio-economic-trends/>