



Policy paper

What values do the UK and EU have in common?

Common Ground

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Future...

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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, resulting in the report “Beyond Brexit: Public perspectives on the future UK-EU relationship”, 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. Research findings have conducted to the present policy paper, developed by British Future in cooperation with Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini and the3million, whose aim is to provide clarity on the state of the nation on shared values between the UK and the EU, combining the national findings from the survey and local dialogues from the focus group and linking with the lived experience of EU citizens living in the UK to make policy recommendations to decision-makers and influencers.

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Introduction

The aim of the present policy paper is twofold. First, it intends to communicate the key insights of the research carried out in the Common Ground project, so that they can be disseminated to all the stakeholders and beneficiaries. Second, it explores the policy implications both in terms of future policy frameworks and people to people connections. The recommendations are especially directed to political leaders and policymakers in the UK and EU institutions to foster cooperation and constructive future relationships.

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.

Meanwhile for EU citizens living in the UK, the hotly contested negotiations of the withdrawal agreement and the complex changes in post-Brexit visa rules placed uncertainty over their rights, as well as new barriers to achieving settled status.

However, since the UK left the European Union, public attitudes have gradually shifted and the turbulence 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.⁽¹⁾ Meanwhile, polling shows that Leave and Remain are now no longer the public's primary political identity.⁽²⁾ Debate around new decisions, such as on the Windsor Framework, the re-joining of the Horizon programme and growing political discussion on EU citizens' rights and documentation further suggest some opening up of more balanced and pragmatic views on the future UK-EU relationship across former fault lines.

It is in this context that the Common Ground project was established, funded by the EU Foreign Policy Instruments and delivered in partnership by Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini, the3million and British Future.

The project has two objectives:

- A. To examine 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.
- B. To support communities of EU citizens in the UK to thrive

This policy report presents the key insights and recommendations from the project research.

It explores 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. This draws on nationally representative opinion polling and 12 focus groups in London, Peterborough and Manchester.

The report moreover considers learnings for promoting closer people to people connections between UK citizens and EU citizens at home and in the continent, drawing on the experience of the the3million engaging with EU citizens and their advocacy work resulting in collective actions and positive outcomes while highlighting and celebrating the individual lived experience.

the3million is a grassroots organization, for EU citizens by EU citizens, dedicated to advocating for the rights of EU citizens living in the United Kingdom (UK) following Brexit. By highlighting the diversity and individual stories of EU citizens in the UK and, at the same time, addressing systemic common issues, the3million fosters a sense of community and solidarity among EU citizens in the UK which leads to active engagement.

As an organisation and a movement of engaged citizens, the3million emerged from the context of the 2016 Referendum. It aims to create an environment where EU citizens can thrive, reach their potential, and have an equal voice in UK society. For that reason, the3million remained

neutral on Brexit. Instead, it focussed on shared concerns and systemic issues affecting EU citizens. It engaged and mobilised Europeans around clearly defined problems such as their residence status, voting rights, data protection, equal treatment, and so on – alongside community building initiatives. This brief history of citizen mobilisation so far points to effective strategies for future civic engagement. For individual citizens, values and rights often feel abstract and remote whereas their specific application is tangible and immediate. A sense of shared identity might generate shared values, but it needs to follow from everyday experiences and interactions.

Common Ground aims to build on this approach and to utilise those emerging strategies.

Individuals and communities collectively engaging in activities or campaigns based on shared issues, interests or desired outcomes gradually discover or develop shared, albeit often unspoken, values. Common Ground facilitates opportunities for social contact, networking and collaboration in a focused, advocacy driven way, which is conducive to achieving positive outcomes, exploring diversity and developing cohesion. Project activities include thematic mapping of relevant civil society organisations, outreach and networking events in the target areas, facilitating online thematic working groups, media campaigns, arts projects and creating an online platform for sharing stories, case studies and good practice examples.

Key Findings of the research Beyond Brexit: Public Perspectives on the Future UK-EU Relationship

This section examines public attitudes towards the future political relationship between the UK and the EU, support or opposition to a closer future relationship with the EU across key policy areas, perceptions of European identity and core values, and interest in exchange programmes and events that foster social mixing with EU citizens.

Three research methods have been used: an evidence review, a nationally representative survey of 2,000 people, carried out by Focaldata, and 12 focus groups in London, Peterborough and Manchester. The research was carried out during June and September 2023.

What did we find?

Attitudes toward Brexit: the balance is shifting toward scepticism

Almost half of the public (49%) now believe it was wrong to leave the EU, while just over a third 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%), with voter cohort change (new voters turning 18) also likely to be a factor shifting the overall balance of Brexit scepticism in public attitudes.

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 Conservative supporters and 24% of Leaver voters 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 increased 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%).

Weak perceptions of pan-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 respondents rank it below another place-based identity.

The public struggle to identify official core 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 core values. Survey and focus group participants were shown a list which included official British values and EU values⁽³⁾: 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.

Spaces of social contact between UK and EU citizens

Most of the public (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 still 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 in Europe, as well as twinning initiatives. Focus group participants talked of the importance of making exchanges inclusive to people on low incomes.

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 'Leave vs. Remain' 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.

This research presents some important evidence about how UK political leaders and policymakers could seek to unlock the potential for 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.

The research shows that people in the UK do not feel European and do not relate to the idea

of having shared European values. Although there are similarities among EU and UK values, exploration of the UK-EU relationship through values-based framing and narratives often resonated poorly with focus group participants, who saw the notion of values as too abstract. If shared values are to be referred to in the future relationship, this will be most impactful through demonstrating values in practice through concrete examples.

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.

A. General policy implications

I. 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. The 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. These 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 policy 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.

3. Bring shared values to life through 'values in action' narratives

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.

4. 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. It may be that only bigger political decisions will lead to a much closer relationship. Yet 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. These collaborations that are issue-specific and pragmatic can help defuse Brexit identities and achieve wider public support.

II. UK-EU Relations – People to People Connections

1. Strengthen pan-European social connections through shared interests

Pan-European identities 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 up to 2016, many people now see social contact and friendships with European neighbours and colleagues as part of everyday life. 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.

The 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.

Facilitated exchange programmes to provide contact with EU citizens overseas can also help to dispel negative 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

Fewer young people currently have opportunities for school trips and exchanges to visit EU countries and form connections. The number of higher education exchanges from the UK to EU countries has also more than halved under the Turing Scheme, compared to 2018/19 levels on Erasmus+.⁽⁴⁾ Policymakers 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.

i. 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, could 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.

- 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.
- Co-designed initiatives could also explore interest in twinning partnerships based around local responses to international issues of shared interest: for example, engaging schools and residents from across different countries in environmental sustainability projects.

ii. Increase professional exchange opportunities

Throughout the focus groups, professional exchange programmes (such as NHS HOPE and

language assistant and engineering exchanges) 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

B. Policy implications for EU policymakers

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

The 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 among respondents, by attitudes to Brexit and to immigration, within questions shown in the research survey on UK-EU cooperation on refugee and human rights.

On the other hand, participants in 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 mandate and the role of specific European institutions.

2. Improve the diversity within the EU institutions and the visibility of ethnic minority MEPs and officials

The focus groups participants indicated that EU institutions and EU itself are largely perceived as 'white' and the lack of representation among officials was stark compared to the UK institutions. Increasing representation of under or unrepresented groups across EU institutions would lead to stronger sense of pan European identity within those communities both within the UK and the EU. To engage EU citizens as a group, both within the EU and the UK, there needs to be an effort to speak directly on matters and concerns that affect them, and an acknowledgement that EU citizens are a diverse group with distinct needs. As part of that, there should be greater attention to minority groups, and race and ethnic minorities in particular, given these communities are under- or even unrepresented in EU citizens advocacy work.

(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

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

(3) The EU has a clear set of values. Those surveyed were the core values taken from article 2 of the Lisbon Treaty and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. Official British values were drawn from government list of British values currently taught in schools.

(4) The number of UK outgoing students to EU countries under the Turing scheme was approximately 8,600 in the 2022/23 academic year; compared to 18,100 under Erasmus+ in 2018/19, due to a shift in exchanges to non-EU countries.

Figures rounded to the nearest 100. Erasmus+ data: http://sepie.es/doc/comunicacion/publicaciones/NCAR20101ENN_anexo_en.pdf;

Turing data: <https://www.turing-scheme.org.uk/funding-opportunities/funding-results/>