: Agora Policy Paper

One Issue, Multiple Perspectives. Views on potential restrictions on the free movement of people post Brexit

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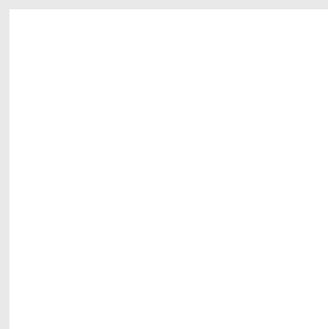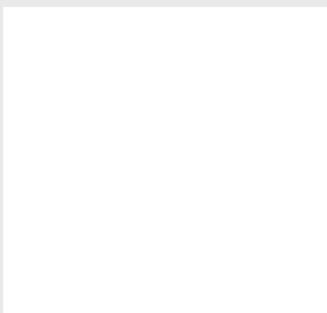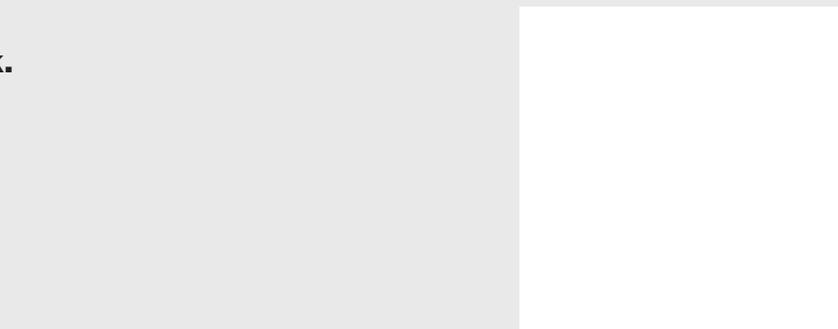
Executive Summary

If British media is anything to go by, it is often hard to see the UK as anything other than a fractured and, at times, even directionless nation; heading into Brexit negotiations with the EU as a perceived "enemy" (to use Chancellor of the Exchequer, Philip Hammond's recent term). Moreover, when speaking to British people, it is clear that many are worried about the fate of the country. Some are more optimistic than others, but many feel concerned about the uncertainty that awaits the UK as it looks to a future outside of the EU. Many worry that – amidst the many points of discussion – issues that affect them personally may be low on the Government's agenda.

Given this landscape, Agora has sought to champion a new way of commenting on the issue of Brexit in this debut publication. This work seeks to fill the void of fractured and ambiguous voices, often existing in echo chambers of Remainers and Leavers, by bringing together a range of opinions on restrictions to the free movement of people post-Brexit.

Using the contacts of Agora members' networks as a basis, it gathered opinions from millennials and baby boomers, Brexiters and Remainers, people from across Europe and people from across the UK, including rural and metropolitan areas in the North as well as Northern Ireland and Gibraltar.

The collection of responses builds on two important assumptions that drive Agora's work. First, that providing an objective platform can give insight into important and often ignored voices. Second, that there is a policy relevance to giving such voices a platform, not only revealing some of the areas which people are worried about but also providing some – albeit rudimentary – advice on future actions for policymakers and influencers.

We chose to focus on the free movement of people as it is just one aspect of the many political, economic, social and security issues that the UK Government must face. However, it is also an issue that touches most people: from UK citizens living in other member states and EU nationals living in the UK, to those that use doctors and tradesmen from other EU countries, to those that study abroad or have family and friends across the EU.

This report does not aim to address all the issues and opportunities restrictions to the free movement of people to and from the EU could produce. However, it does aim to offer an insight into some primary concerns as well as develop some initial suggestions for how to deal with these issues based on suggestions and concerns from a wide variety of people.

This work is basic and does not aim to make any broad claims about the British people or forgotten voices; however, it is a proof of concept. It reveals that these endeavours are important. Thus, this is the first report among many that will attempt to bring together a variety of people, providing a platform for unheard voices and tapping into valuable but neglected ideas.
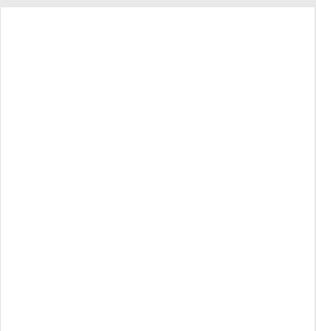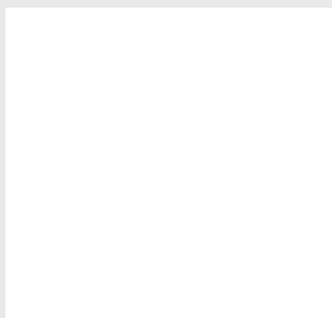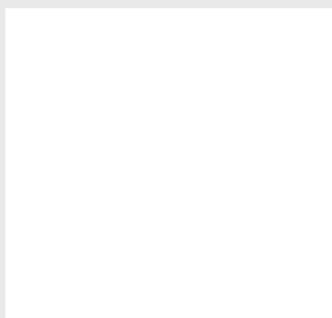
Table of Contents

Introduction

Following the UK's decision to leave the EU, debates and commentary have often failed to provide an assessment of the public's views; this paper seeks to contribute to closing this gap. Using the Agora network, it has drawn common concerns and ideas from the responses of 30 very different individuals on restrictions to the free movement of people. This issue was chosen because it allows respondents to consider just one aspect of the many potential implications of the UK leaving the EU, but is also an issue that touches everyone in some capacity.

The first section will outline the background to the issue; detailing the results of the UK referendum in June 2016 and the aftermath of the vote and, then, discussing briefly some of the key aspects of restrictions to the free movement of people between the UK and the EU. The second section will analyse the results. It will briefly describe the methodology, before highlighting nine common areas of concern (travel, exchange of ideas, the EU/ UK divide, the economy, the labour market, the Irish border, education, public services and EU citizens in the UK and UK citizens in the EU). It will then explore the two most common suggestions made by participants, locally driven solutions and more clarity. Finally, it will conclude and consider the implications of these results.

Background to the issue

The EU vote

On the 23rd June 2016, the United Kingdom (UK) voted to leave the European Union (EU).[1] The turnout was 72.2%, and 51.9% voted to leave – compared to 48.1% for remain.[2] The vote took a number of political commentators by surprise, with most pollsters predicting a remain victory.[3] In fact, the results revealed considerable generational, socioeconomic and geographic divides within the UK.[4]

Following the Brexit vote, Prime Minister David Cameron, who had campaigned to stay in the EU, stepped down and Theresa May became the Prime Minister responsible for taking the UK out of the EU. While she also campaigned to stay in the EU, May has since come out in favour of a "hard Brexit". However, much debate has ensued about what this would actually entail, with senior politicians often showing reticence to fully describe their vision of a post-EU Britain.

At the same time, it has often been hard to get a sense of what the UK public wants. Theresa May hoped that her "hard Brexit" would gain a mandate in the elections in June 2017, however it arguably, failed to do so.[5] This not only left the country in a weakened position in terms of its negotiations with the EU but also revealed a lack of understanding about what the public wants.[6]

Although the role of Brexit in the results should not be overstated, it was clearly at the forefront of many voters' minds.[7] Unfortunately, the results, were far from decisive: the Conservatives with their "hard Brexit" stance lost 13 seats but increased their national vote by 5.5%;[8] the Labour party with their, fairly ambiguous, "jobs first Brexit" surpassed expectations, gaining 30 new seats and increasing their share of the national vote by 9.5%;[9] and the Liberal Democrats, a party explicitly stating that they believed the UK is better in the EU, gained an uninspiring four seats.[10] This seemed to indicate that the views of the British public remained elusive.

Moreover, the UK has become increasingly characterised as a "divided Britain." Beyond the divides revealed by the initial vote, the debate between Remainers and Brexiters has been polarised.[11] Many on the Remain side have accused Leave campaigners of lying during the campaign and misleading the British public; while Leave voters have criticised Remainers as bad losers. Leavers also reject an interpretation of the election results which, they feel, presents the British public as unable to make informed decision.[12] The divisive nature of the Remain/ Leave debate has often tainted objective discussion from both camps.

Similarly, many have chosen to use research into the views of "ordinary Britons" to highlight this divide rather than seeking to ask what they actually want.[13] While it is important to better understand these divides, this commentary has often meant that the views of British people remain unclear and has fed into a continuing narrative that: "The Brits don't know what they want."

This seeming ambiguity is especially worrying given the time pressures on the Brexit negotiations, which officially started in June 2017.[14] The UK officially invoked Article 50 in March 2017, giving the EU and UK until March 2019 to agree on a deal to avoid the dread "cliff edge", where the UK leaves without a deal (although the negotiation period could be extended if all 27 EU states agreed).[15] A number of commentators have warned against the mantra that "no deal is better than a bad deal", with some even suggesting that the UK leaving the EU without a deal would create a "cascade of chaos."[16] However, while there has been some progress in negotiations, with agreements on some technical points and reports of improvement in the pace of talks, the chief EU negotiator, Michel Barnier, claims there has been "no decisive progress on any of the main issues."[17]

Many have blamed the UK's approach, for example, Ben Chu recently commented on the "kamikaze-style" nature of the UK negotiation tactics, while Leader of the Opposition, Jeremy Corbyn, said that the Conservative party is so divided leaders are "negotiating with each other instead of the EU."[18]

These negotiations are no small feat, as Hunt and Wheeler note "unpicking 43 years of treaties and agreements covering thousands of different subjects was never going to be a straightforward task."[19] As such, many are concerned about how a divided and directionless Britain will be able to negotiate all these issues in just two years.

Restrictions to the free movement of people

One of the issues being negotiated is restrictions to the free movement of people. Central to the European single market is the commitment to the "free movement of goods, persons, services and capital."[20] This allows citizens of EU member states to move freely across other members states to for leisure work and resettle abroad.[21] Currently, about 3.6 million people EU citizens live in the UK, and 1.2 million UK citizens live in other EU countries, while many more from both the EU and the UK travel around the EU for leisure, work and to visit family.[22]

The Prime Minister has confirmed that the "[f]ree movement will end in March 2019."[23] This includes one of the key areas of negotiations: "[a]greeing what rights EU citizens already in the UK – and UK citizens living in the rest of the EU – will have after Brexit."[24] Governmental guidance for EU citizens living in the UK states "qualifying individuals" (those who arrived before 29th March 2017 and have been in the UK continuously for more than five years) can apply for "settled status" which "means these citizens will be free to live here, have access to public funds and services and apply for British citizenship."[25]

Eventually, the government pledged to implement "new rules for EU citizens on long-term settlement" and that, until then, EU citizens coming to the UK will have to register.[26] Official documents suggest that there has been a lot of agreement between the EU and the UK on these issues, although a number of key points of discussion – such as the status of criminals, voting rights and professional qualifications have not yet been agreed.[27] Despite reassurances, there have been a number of reports of EU citizens in the UK fearing their future in a post-Brexit Britain.[28]

Beyond this, travelling for work, to visit family or for leisure may be impacted by changes to things such as potentially more stringent passport control mechanisms, more expensive flights if the UK withdraws from any related EU agreements, such as the Open Skies agreement; and more expensive insurance if the UK withdraws from the European Health Insurance Card scheme – which David Davis, Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, has said it will.[29]

Once again, discussions over these issues have often fuelled more disagreement. For example, discussions about how restrictions to the free movement of people could impact divisive issues, such as the labour market and public services, have remained polarised. For the labour market, some worry that the pool of potential employees in the UK could fall with a decline in EU immigration detrimentally impacting sectors, such as the service industry, which rely on EU migrants.[30] Others have suggested that it could lead to an increase in wages and "British jobs for British workers."[31] For public services, many maintain that reduced immigration will ease the pressure on public services, especially the NHS, while others maintain that the NHS is held up by the EU citizens that work in it – and, thus, could collapse without these individuals.[32]

Debates around restrictions have also engulfed other, politically sensitive issues, such as Gibraltar and Northern Ireland. Secretary of State for Defence, Sir Michael Fallon, was challenged on whether the UK would protect Gibraltar from Spain on the Andrew Marr show, following the issue being raised in negotiation documents.[33] The UK Government has also stated its wish to avoid going back to a hard border in Northern Ireland, mindful that guarded checkpoints could reignite memories of the conflict.[34] However, some are sceptical about the viability of these plans – in fact, Labour have labelled the current plans for the border "a fantasy frontier."[35]

Given the extensive commentary on the possible outcomes of restrictions to the free movement of people, this report will avoid adding another prediction to the mix. Instead, it will seek to provide a platform for

a range of voices, in doing so it hopes to avoid a debate over a "divided Britain" or take sides and, instead, identifying common concerns, feelings and recommendations.

Thus, the next section will briefly outline the methodology then will list the nine common areas of concern and two recommendations suggested by most respondents. Then the final section will conclude with some implications of these findings.

The perspectives

We asked our sample five questions to get a sense of how they felt about restrictions to the free movement of people post-Brexit:

1. If there are restrictions to the free movement of people between the UK and EU, how do you think it will affect you/ your community? If you could give specific examples to demonstrate how it will be affected that would be very helpful.

2. Do you think the restrictions will be beneficial or problematic for you/ your community? Please elaborate as much as you can and give examples of the possible risks and benefits where possible.

3. Is there anything you/ your community can do, without the Government, to mitigate some of the risks presented by restrictions to the free movement of people and exploit some of the opportunities?

4. What do you/ your community need from Government to help minimise the potential problems and maximise the potential benefits of restrictions to the free movement of people to and from the EU?

5. Is there an issue linked to you/ your community and restrictions on freedom of movement that is important to you but you think is under represented in themedia and the political discourse, public debate etc?

Although the sample is small (with only 30 respondents) it represents a range of ages, political affiliations, backgrounds and geographical areas. The respondents' ages ranged from 19 to 65; they had a variety of educational backgrounds, with the majority holding an undergraduate degree or above, a fifth not holding a university degree and some holding vocational equivalents; they represented a number of different vocations (including teacher, student, manual labourer, administrational, doctor, accountant and university researcher) and some were unemployed or retired; they were from a number of different countries and a number of different areas within the UK; and had differing engagement in the Brexit negotiations, with some campaigners and embassy officials and others who said they had never really discussed their opinions on Brexit before; and there was also mix between those that supported Brexit and those that did not.

As mentioned, this variation was important. First, it brought together people who have often been portrayed by the media to have competing divisions and are often perceived as being on two opposing sides of the Brexit debate. Second, many of these voices represented neglected but important points of view and so this gives them a platform.

The next section will outline the results. The first half will describe the nine common concerns (travel, exchange of ideas, EU/ UK divide, the economy, the labour market, the Irish border, education, public services and EU citizens in the UK and UK citizens in the EU). The second half will delve into the two suggestions made by respondents, locally driven solutions and better clarity.

Issues important to respondents

The general mood of these respondents was one of mild concern. Many expressing scepticism towards the "potential benefits" of Brexit, but were also generally optimistic that the effects of Brexit would not be "that bad". More specifically, responses revealed nine common areas of concern; each will be treated in turn in this section.

Travel

Many worried about how their ability to go on holiday, travel for work, or visit family could be impacted. Although most felt that restrictions would amount to no more than minor "inconveniences", they all agreed that it would probably lead to at least some delays. Many respondents thought the biggest change would be

more problems at the airport. For example, an Irish respondent expressed concerns about longer queues at the Holyhead Port. A Swiss-German woman also said restrictions "will probably be connected to longer queues at the airports." A British accountant living in Kent also said: "I'm concerned about how much extra time it will take to go abroad, whether it be for work or recreation."

Beyond this, some worried about broader issues. The same Swiss-German woman added that restrictions may also impact "free roaming in the EU." A retired couple from the North also commented on roaming charges but were more concerned about "travel and safety." They expressed concern about how restrictions could affect their ability to take medication abroad, their access to health services and the cost of their "health/accident insurance."

A British woman living in Berlin also noted that, "even if Brits have to apply for a Schengen visa and if these applications were more or less guaranteed to be successful, it is the monetary and bureaucratic cost" that could be problematic.

A number of respondents commented on how this could impact their freedom to travel. For example, a young professional living in a Northern town which voted strongly for Brexit stated: "Travelling is something I've loved to do for years. The ease of being able to do it now makes it even more enjoyable … [this]… may not be the case post Brexit with the possible restriction of free movement."

Others were concerned about consequences for their work. A university researcher said: "[m]y research depends on my own free movement"; he said it required the ability to move freely and cheaply and that, if this were restricted or made more expensive it would present a "barrier" to his work. He also said that he, like other researchers, had to travel to conferences "frequently within the EU." He stressed that the ability to do this was important for him to showcase work and make contacts, arguing that restrictions could reduce his work's impact.

A British events planner from Kent also said that she worried that restrictions to her ability to travel easily between the UK and the EU could risk the "excellent and competitive service" she was able to offer clients. She said that if this becomes more difficult she will "have to charge higher rates to clients for the same service."

A British Armenian community leader also noted the importance of being able to visit family – stating that "making a home in a different country is much easier if you know you can go back and forth to see family and friends."

It is worth noting that, in general, older people expressed more optimism than younger people. There was a sense among those over thirty that things would be OK, many of these respondents spoke of situations – either before changes in the EU or current relationships with other countries, like the US – without free access as an example of how travel is still possible. However, those under thirty tended to show greater signs of concern and highlighted that fundamental aspects of their life – such as their ability to work or study in the EU – could be detrimentally impacted by restrictions to the free movement of people.

Exchange of ideas

About a fifth of respondents made some reference to the potential for restrictions to their communities' ability to exchange ideas. Interestingly this was most clearly stated by members of the Armenian diaspora and university researchers. For example, two members of the Armenian diaspora said that it may make it much more difficult "to exchange cultural events with artists, scholars, writers from around the European Armenian diaspora." They explained that they rely "on free movement in bringing speakers, workshop leaders, musicians, language teachers and others … to share with the British Armenians." They felt that "[w]ithout this, we will definitely become … impoverished in cultural terms."

They felt that, on a broader level, these issues were not unique to their community and suspected "many educational and cultural institutions and charities like ourselves will be very disappointed to see

cultural exchanges with individuals and institutions around Europe restricted." Both agreed that freedom of movement had allowed them to thrive. Restrictions to this could threaten their "increasing access to the talents and ideas of people in other countries who can visit us in London without passport or even work restrictions."

These concerns were also expressed by two university researchers, who noted how their departments had benefitted from being able to exchange ideas with counterparts in other European countries. Both worried that this could be threatened by potential restrictions to the free movement of people. In fact, when asked what they wanted from government both highlighted the importance of these exchanges to quality of UK research and called on the UK Government to make sure they could still happen, even if restrictions were put in place.

One researcher gave a specific example of how these exchanges had been pivotal to his work when he discussed a project that "developed out of a collaboration between myself and a visiting researcher from Germany. Had freedom of movement not been available, and this visit not happened, this project would not have happened and no commercial outcome developed."

EU/UK divide

In a similar vein, a few respondents argued that, with fewer EU people travelling to the UK and vice versa, there may be a greater sense of division.

First, this idea was captured by the belief that, even if actual difficulties with travelling to and from the EU were not that bad, there could still be a greater feeling of separation that could restrict movement where tangible restrictions did not. This was best captured by a British woman living in Berlin who said that feeling a "loss of the freedom of choice to simply move somewhere else and start working or living in another EU country … will have a big impact."

Second, a number of respondents indicated that they would feel less part of the EU, and Europe. For example, this same respondent worried about British people living in EU countries and feeling a "general sense that you do not belong to this group anymore." A Northern business owner also said that the main benefit, for him "personally, … of free movement is the diversity it brings." A retired couple also said that restrictions "may impact us profoundly – it changes the context in which we live, the culture of the city and our whole sense of "belonging" when we travel within other EU countries."

An interesting parallel to this, was how community groups representing minorities also feared more separation from the rest of the UK and pressure to conform. This was most clear in comments from the Armenian diaspora who spoke of a fear of greater "isolation". A British Armenian community leader said:

"Europe has enabled a special identity for minorities who integrate well into the country within which they live and feel very attached to that country – but who are also different from the mainstream culture. They (we) are able to see themselves as part of a larger mosaic, while in Europe. Indeed the majority culture in any one country is a minority in the whole of Europe. Everyone has to learn to get along with different kinds of people. We suspect there will be more pressure to conform to majority norms post-Brexit and restriction on freedom of movement will aggravate this problem."

Economy

A number of respondents were worried about how possible restrictions to the free movement of people could impact the UK's economy. In both Gibraltar and Northern Ireland, where the local economy is tightly connected with their EU neighbour, this worry was very prevalent. For example, a member of the Gibraltarian embassy said that "Gibraltar's economy and that of the neighbouring Spanish hinterland are closely interlinked in a symbiotic relationship."

They explained that there is "considerable trade between both sides of the border" and that "some 13,000 workers, almost all of them EU nationals, cross into Gibraltar each day to work" and that "Gibraltar accounts for 25% of the GDP of Spanish hinterland. In turn, Spanish tourists are a very large part of the 11.25m annual visitors who contribute to the economy." They stressed that this "process requires the fluidity at the border for workers and tourists alike, as well as for residents on either side."

This was also noted with regards to Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. One respondent said that "the agricultural sectors of North/South are inextricably linked and it would be a nightmare to have different standards for each side of the small island."

Some respondents also noted that companies who rely on the freedom of movement between the UK and the EU may suffer as a result of Brexit. For example, a photographer from the North noted that, while his clients were UK-based, they might suffer as a result of a restrictions. Similarly, an accountant living in Kent said that he worried restrictions could impact businesses which work extensively with the EU, adding that this "could, in turn, affect my own client base." A British woman living in Kent and working in events said that her "client base is predominately based in Europe." She worried that additional restrictions, or costs, to travelling for work could mean "we could struggle to remain competitive post-Brexit against our European counterparts."

On a broader level, one respondent said: "I would expect some negative effect on the UK economy (in the sense that free trade, including the free movement of people, helps to maximise the efficiency of resource use)."

Labour market

The main issue for respondents when discussing the potential impact of restrictions to the free movement on the economy was the labour market. Opinions on these issues generally seemed to follow the broader national debate, with some worried about a decline in potential employees while others hopeful of an increase in wages and jobs for those remaining in the UK.

A British Armenian community leader said that restrictions may result in a less than perfect candidate taking jobs in the UK. They noted that: "Those British Armenians who have any kind of business often reach out across borders to find just the right person to fill an available job" but this may not be as easy if restrictions were put in place.

A retired couple from a rural area of the North was also concerned about these issues, and highlighted a number of sectors around them that would be heavily impacted; "from manual labour in agriculture (seasonal fruit picking etc) through to skilled labour in the NHS, industry and education." The added: "We don't produce anywhere near enough of our own." A similar assessment was made by someone from North Wales; he said restrictions "would adversely affect provision of healthcare, hospitality and construction services since they are very dependent on EU citizens."

A respondent who ran a charity felt it may be more difficult for employers to find potential employees – although he did not think the implications would be that bad for his own organisation. He said: "New restrictions on EU nationals coming to the UK will be marginally negative for us in terms of the pool of staff available for employment (actually one of our staff is currently a non-British EU national), but we do not expect to have any real problems finding suitable staff."

In fact, this same respondent touched on the other side of the debate. He argued that, while there would probably be labour shortages, the debate should not ignore the fact that "for many people who voted for Brexit, this was the whole point." He explained:
"Relatively low-skilled labourers in sectors like construction, agriculture, or healthcare (thinking more of hospital porters than doctors) were feeling undercut by EU immigrants; labour shortages in these sectors will push up wages and make working in them more attractive for British nationals, and for those EU and other nationals who already have the right of residence in the UK."

This was echoed in another respondent's reply, from an Irish person looking to move to the UK, who said: "The only benefit I can see for myself after the restriction of free movement of people might be increased job opportunities if the pool of skilled workers decreases in the years following Brexit, this, of course, might not be good for the economy overall."

A German who has lived in the UK for much of her life had also noticed a similar sentiment in "a small minority within the community that consider the restrictions to free movement as beneficial." She described one such individual who moved to the UK when he was young and has now obtained permanent residency; she said that "he now holds the view that due to restrictions on free movement there will be more job opportunities available for people like himself."

The Irish border

Just four of our respondents touched on this issue; however, those that did expressed concern about what restrictions to the free movement of people could mean, both for personal reasons and because of how it could impact painful national memories.

As one respondent, an Irish man, said: "my main concern since the Brexit Referendum has been the Common Travel Area and how it will be affected. Ease of travel for citizens between the UK and Ireland is very important to me since my family consists of citizens/residents of both countries."

On a broader level, most were worried about bringing "back painful memories … of the bad old days." As one respondent said: "The hard work done in recent years to ease tensions in the North of Ireland would not benefit from a return to military checkpoints and border control."

Another, who lobbied in the US on behalf of Irish issues, noted that, while there were costs to maintaining the soft border (including "developing, patrolling, and maintaining border sites") a hard border would bring "back the psychological manifestation that there is a difference between Ireland and Northern Ireland." She explained that "[b]order check points were targets for bombings throughout the troubles and represent a divide across the Island of Ireland as a whole."

An Irish woman agreed with this, stating:
"The soft border has become a symbol of reconciliation and peace following the Troubles. It has allowed for a mellowing of historical consciousness and a softening of political tensions, amongst northern communities and between both parts of the island. The implications of a change to freedom of movement would be wide-ranging and deeply felt, economically, politically and personally."

However, many respondents felt confident that it was in the interests of the UK Government to ensure the border remained a soft one, and thus they believed it would not change significantly. For example, one said Theresa May "will protect the common travel area agreement and I will not be too affected in terms of travelling back and forward between Ireland and England."

Education

Many worried about how restrictions to the free movement of people could impact the accessibility of universities for individuals and could impact the quality of research in the UK.

A Swiss-German woman said that she felt it may make it less affordable for people such as herself to study in the UK. She also expressed concerns about Erasmus, citing a case in Switzerland where Erasmus was ended in the country because of "a popular vote on restriction on free movement" and the Swiss government then had to pay much more money to give Swiss students similar opportunities. A British woman living in Berlin also noted how easily she had found it to study in Berlin and feared that it would not be the same for people in the future. She said: "our access to (free or very cheap) further education in the future is threatened."

On a more personal level, a British student at Leeds Metropolitan University shared similar concerns, saying that "[a]s a young student I fear the opportunities I may be losing as a result of not having free access around the EU." He said that he was worried about decreasing opportunities to study abroad because of Brexit. A recent graduate also faced a similar dilemma when considering her next steps, fearing that opportunities to study on a Masters programme could be limited to the UK.

As mentioned, the two university researchers were especially worried about how restrictions to the free movement of people could impact the quality of education in British universities. Beyond the exchange of ideas, one worried that restrictions to the free movement could impact how universities could generate their own funds. He said:

"One way of attracting funding … is to offer consulting services to companies… This is hugely valuable as it represents a way to increase the value for money of limited research funds. If freedom of movement were restricted, the potential range of clients for such services would diminish dramatically and this source of funding would be all but cut off."

Another problem was noted by a PhD student, who noted that many of the people in his department – from senior academics to fellow PhD students – were not from the UK and many were from the EU. He worried that restrictions to the free movement of people may mean fewer EU citizens come to study in the UK, to the detriment of UK's research capability. He said: "For me this is the biggest tragedy of the Brexit vote, and makes me concerned about the prospect of a brain drain from UK universities to more welcoming countries in Europe."

Public services

The impact of the restrictions to the free movement of people on public services was brought up by a number of respondents. Many felt that there would be less pressure on public services as a result of restrictions to the free movement of people. For example, according to a self-defined "reluctant remainer":

"The present arrangement gives the citizen of any EU country the right to settle in any other regardless of the consequences for the people already living there. The consequences for England, which is already the most densely populated country in the EU after Malta, even slightly more than the Netherlands, and whose population is growing anyway, would be devastating."

Another said that "a decline in net immigration will certainly help to ease pressure on UK infrastructure (schools, hospitals, housing etc.), which has struggled to keep up with growth in the population." Similarly, a retired couple agreed that "if you consider the effect of UNCONTROLLED migration on local communities where pressure is put on housing schools, health and social services would need to be addressed" there could be advantages to restrictions.

Conversely, our interviews also showed were concerned that restrictions to the free movement of people could put more pressure on public services. A retired couple from the North stated: "accessing health services and social services" would be more difficult because of the "potential for shortage of doctors and nurses to support our NHS since we are not producing enough of either and rely on EU and non-EU migrants."

A Northern business owner echoed these concerns, stating: "the last couple of years I have visited hospital often. there seem a lot of EU workers running the NHS, so if I needed the NHS I would worry for staffing at every level." Although he added that if "we do struggle to fill important jobs… then I suppose exceptions will be made." However, a German citizen doing his PhD in the UK was less optimistic, arguing that British people have failed to realise how important these EU citizens are to the running of UK services.

EU citizens in the UK and UK citizens in the EU

A number of our respondents expressed concern about how restrictions to the free movement of people may impact those EU citizens working in the UK. Some of these concerns were from EU nationals who had been living in the UK before the vote, such as a Danish man working in events who said: "A potential problem would be if I had to leave the country." Similarly, a German woman argued that Brexit "will affect my possibilities to work in the UK in future." She added that "I will probably not be able to live in the UK for long without having a job. [Moreover] …[s]ince it is difficult to get a job here in the UK and jobs are often temporary, this is very inconvenient and even problematic."

A German citizen who moved to England when she was a child, said she was worried opportunities in the country she had grown up in may no longer be open to her. She said that "until now", she had no problems applying for university or "looking for or changing jobs." However, she said that she feared this would not be as easy in the future, stating "that EU citizens might be at a disadvantage, particularly when applying for a job" or when "moving jobs as part of career progression."

This same respondent is part of a Tamil diaspora who emigrated from Sri Lanka to Europe and now lives in the UK, she commented on the concerns of others within this community, many of which mirrored her own and those of other respondents that we spoke to, she said:
"There are mixed reactions to this fear within the community. While those who lived here long enough feel confident that they can apply for permanent residency…, others no longer feel welcome and are considering options elsewhere in Europe. Then there are those, like myself, who having made full use of the free movement rights in order to study, work and live in various European countries over the past five years, … do not know whether they would still qualify for permanent residency and are stuck in an "indecisive limbo" of not knowing what to do."

A number of people said they had seen this confusion and concern in their colleagues and peers. For example, a British PhD student said: "A large proportion of my friends and colleagues are EU nationals, who now do not know if they will be able to continue their work in the UK."

At the same time, a number of British people also worried about their job prospects in other EU member states. A recent graduate spoke of her concerns about being able to find employment in a potentially restricted job market. She said: "The job market is fierce and being able to expand my search past England opens up many doors for me, however I am concerned this will not be the case post BREXIT." Similarly, an accountant living in Kent said: "I'm concerned about restricting my future prospects with working, as right now I have the option to go and work in Europe whereas post Brexit that might not be a plausible option."

This chimed with comments from a member of the Armenian diaspora, who said that, in the same way the UK job market may be promising for non-British citizens, "[l]ikewise, a British Armenian with particular skills might have found a job elsewhere in Europe."

A British woman in Berlin also noted that being a native English speaker and an EU citizen had, in the past, worked to her advantage "because [employers] don't have to bother with any visa issues, and know that we will not need extra support with things like insurance, as we have the same conditions as Germans." However, she commented that this may change post-Brexit.

Ideas for advocates and policymakers

Respondents were asked what they wanted from the Government, to mitigate the   potential problems and maximise the potential advantages of restrictions, and what they felt they and their communities could do to achieve the same ends. This exercise revealed some interesting and useful suggestions.

Locally driven solutions

There was a real sense among some respondents that they and their communities could do some of the work to ensure they, and the UK, were not detrimentally impacted by restrictions to the free movement of people.

For example, a PhD student said that, in the wake of possible restrictions, him and his peers – as well as British universities more generally – should look to revitalise connections with other universities, not just within the EU but outside as well, and ensure that the exchange of ideas is not restricted by Brexit. Another researcher in a university agreed with this, he said that universities should use "networking/ collaborating online" to "diminish to some extent the stifling impact of restricting movement."

There was also a sense among some respondents that Brexit represented an opportunity to help more in the local community. A retired couple argued that one way in which they could mitigate some of the risks of restrictions post-Brexit – and exploit some of the opportunities – would be to volunteer more in their local community. They argued:
"The opportunity for co-ordinating a part-time labour force with a varied skill set and proven track record would seem obvious. This could provide a valuable resource for the local community by keeping older people in "social contact" a major factor in depression and dementia. Potentially there would be less strain on health services and boost for the local economy and a reduction in need for social care whilst helping pension provision."

A member of the Tamil community in London said that she had already seen evidence of people helping others in her community, by helping "each other with the application for permanent residency." She said: "People are quite willing to help each other with their knowledge of the process, proficiency in English and experience of submitting the right evidence for the application."

A member of Gibraltarian embassy also said that this was happening across borders. They said that "[d] espite times of high political heat, Gibraltar law enforcement and its local Spanish counterparts have never let down on working against issues like crime and terrorism."

Many also said they needed to work collectively to ensure their communities' needs were addressed. For example, a PhD student said that universities and students needed to lobby the Government to make sure it was properly considering the impact of its decisions on the research community. A Swiss-German woman said that people need to engage in "[p]olitical activism, demonstrations, research and awareness rising [sic]." A Momentum member also said: "We believe that trying to engage as many people as possible in the development of the negotiations will be important." Similarly, a young British woman living in Berlin also stressed that "it is important for relevant think tanks and affected organisations to inform the government and decision makers about the potential broader consequences of their actions."

Better clarity

As this report has detailed, many felt confused about how Brexit was going to impact them. For example, someone living in North Wales said: "There are a lot of unknowns arising from the negotiations in relation to freedom of movement in terms of who that will catch, how it will be applied and when it will be applied etc."

This had clearly been an issue for a number facing possible changes. For example, a British PhD student said that there had been a lot of uncertainty about the position of many of his peers, which had "been the cause of real distress." Similarly, a German woman who has been living in the UK for the last ten years

said that her, and her community, had experienced most of their distress because their future remained so uncertain, she said:

"It ultimately comes down to not knowing – at this point – what the future entails for EU citizens in the UK. It might well be that EU citizens will continue to enjoy all their existing rights after Brexit, yet the uncertainty itself causes people in my community to 'imagine' potential restrictions, which in turn means they consider options based on these 'imagined' restrictions."

Many asked for more information. For example, the same respondent sought "clarity on what the rights of EU citizens will be once the UK has officially left the EU." She recognised that the implications of this would be very beneficial, as it "would help people in my community plan their future, whether that is a move to another company or on a larger scale, a move to another European country." Similarly, a Danish man – when asked what he would request from the British Government – said "[c]lear communication about who it matters for. I haven't heard anything yet about how this is going to affect me, so it would help to get more info."

Nor, did people feel this was just the job of the Government. In fact, one respondent felt the actual information given by the Government was enough, highlighting a report for EU citizens living in the UK (although many others felt this report was not clearly signposted). A lot of people looked to the media and criticised it for scaremongering and misrepresenting the important issues, while others suggested that non-governmental organisations, such as campaign groups and leaders of impacted groups, may be best placed to tell their members how they will be impacted. A young British woman also said that "it is a question of informing ourselves as best as possible about the possible different scenarios, and how these could affect us – what possibilities there are for us to secure our status etc."
Worryingly, some people have also tried to proactively secure their futures by seeking alternative citizenship. When asked what people can do to bypass the potential risks of a restriction to the free movement of people, many said they were thinking of either leaving the UK or, at least, trying to get citizenship from another country.

Conclusion and implications

This report hopes to contribute constructively to the current discussions around Brexit by presenting a wide variety of views on restrictions to the free movement of people to and from the EU. It has attempted to outline which issues people consider most important and asked what they feel the Government and their local communities can do to mitigate risks and maximise benefits. In doing so, it has highlighted a number of common areas of concern, as well as interesting and valuable suggestions for policymakers and influencers.

The common areas of concern are:
1.   The impact restrictions could have on travel, whether to visit family, work or simply go on holiday
2.   How it could impact the exchange of ideas, both culturally and academically
3.   The risk that restrictions could create a feeling of separation between the UK and the EU
4.   The potential implications for the economy
5.   Some felt the labour market would be adversely impacted by a smaller pool of potential employees, while others felt those remaining in the UK could benefit from better job prospects.
6.   A few of our respondents were worried about how the Irish border may be impacted
7.   Some worried about how restrictions could impact education
8.   A number were concerned that public services may be understaffed, while others thought there may be less pressure on them with a decline in EU immigration
9.   EU citizens living in the UK were worried about their ability to stay, while UK citizens worried about their ability to live and work in the EU.

The media often presents the state of the nation as divided, despondent and depressed. However, there were a number of areas that most respondents had similar concerns about and, in some cases – especially when the debates were a lot less politicised, such as with travel delays – all respondents had almost identical opinions and worries. Thus, moving forward, the Government, the media and non-governmental organisations, such as campaign groups, charities and think tanks, should seek to address and better explain these issues – and, perhaps, be less focused on "divided Britain".

The report also sought to crowdsource ideas to advise the future actions of these same groups. This highlighted a desire for locally driven change and clarity over the possible future of the UK. First, many respondents held a desire for greater community activism in efforts to mitigate potential risks, as well as to maximise the potential opportunities, of restrictions to the free movement of people to and from the EU. Some called for more to help in the local community, while some said this was already happening, and others suggested greater efforts to make sure their communities' voices were heard.

Second, there was a demand for clarity. This was not just from the Government; many respondents spoke of the importance of individuals making sure they had done their own research and helping others understand their prospects. Some respondents also saw a job for non-governmental organisations and the media in promoting clarity, for example, many criticised the media for scaremongering. The suggestions were useful and realistic and should be taken seriously by policymakers and influencers.

Without being an exhaustive survey, the collection of multiple perspectives on one issue, has shown some interesting and useful findings. Crucially, this paper illustrates the importance of involving more people in the discussion. This insight drives Agora as a grassroots think tank and is fundamental to our core vision of shaping future UK foreign policy.

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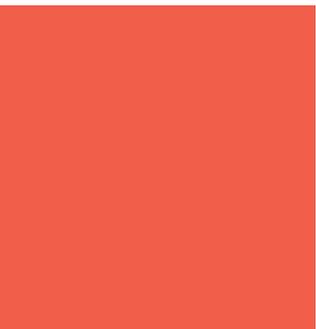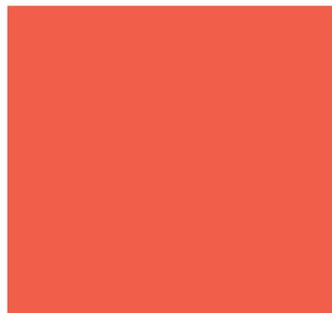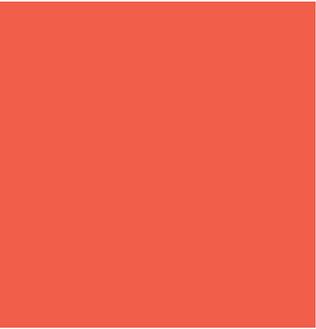
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