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A Visa System Fit for the Future



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A Visa System Fit for the Future

1. Introduction

WHILE THE UK Government claims that net migration figures are too high, companies and business organisations spanning most sectors of the UK economy have called for more overseas workers to join the UK labour market to help boost the UK's economic growth¹.

Although there is widespread recognition that the UK Government also needs to address current skills shortages by developing the UK's domestic workforce, the UK will, and should, continue to welcome overseas workers to the workforce.

With an ageing population² – and, increasingly, an unwell population³ – demographic change means that a significant reduction in economic dependence on overseas workers may be difficult to achieve – even with improvements in domestic upskilling and in population health.

It is therefore vital that the UK Government centres pragmatism in its approach to visa policy. It is, however, far more difficult to change the economic reality that the UK needs a sensible and evidence-led visa policy in order to stave off economic stagnation, ensure the resilience of our supply chains and reduce the persistence of inflation.

The UK Trade and Business Commission made several recommendations on visa policies as part of its June 2023 report, *Trading our Way to Prosperity: a Blueprint for Policymakers*⁴. Those

recommendations focussed on the practical steps that need to be taken in order to begin approaching visa policy in an economically literate way.

In this report, we expand some of those recommendations and consider how they can be applied. Our recommendations include reform of the Shortage Occupation List and Seasonal Worker Schemes, and the introduction of new Youth Mobility Visa schemes, to enable the UK Government to implement a visa system fit for the future.

2. The UK Trade and Business Commission recommendations

The UK Trade and Business Commission's (UKTBC) June 2023 report, *Trading our Way to Prosperity: a Blueprint for Policymakers*⁵ highlighted immigration policy as a core area of focus in order to improve the UK's growth and ability to prosper through trade.



The UKTBC's core recommendations on immigration and visas from June 2023 are summarised below:

- The UKTBC called for the UK to negotiate bilateral and reciprocal youth mobility visa schemes with individual EU member states, enabling people between the ages of 18 to 35 to travel and work in the EU and UK for a period of up to five years. The UKTBC recommended regular review of the uptake and practical implications of such a scheme – with barriers to access and effectiveness considered and addressed.
- The UKTBC urged the UK to participate in the EU's List of Travellers scheme to facilitate visa-free trips for UK school groups to EU schools and vice-versa.
- The UKTBC recommended a comprehensive review of the implementation and uptake of the Seasonal Worker Visa Scheme in order to determine areas for improvement.
- The UKTBC has suggested a visa waiver agreement with the EU for those working in the cultural sector on a temporary basis. The UKTBC has also suggested that bilateral cultural international agreements with individual EU member states could address some of the difficulties of travelling to the EU for project-based work in the arts sector.
- The UKTBC additionally suggested the review and potential relaxation of business visitor rules to enable corporations to bring skilled workers into the UK more easily for short term projects. The UKTBC has called for the UK Government to conduct a review of the visa costs and paperwork facing UK businesses – with a view to making the system more accessible to businesses of all sizes. The UKTBC also recommends the negotiation of a special reciprocal visa category for freelance workers with the EU.

- The UKTBC has made it clear that all the above policies must be complemented by comprehensive skills development programmes here in the UK.

The UKTBC's recommendations on immigration policy represent some clear starting points for a future UK Government looking to reform the immigration system in a way that begins to address economic challenges without engaging in immediate drastic overhaul. With a focus on measures that could reduce tightness in the UK labour market – and reintroduce the flexibility that businesses and individuals need – the UKTBC's view is centred on what is practical, achievable and economically sensible.

3. UK Government visa policy

The UK Government has put multiple policies in place to make it harder for people to obtain work and family visas in the UK, despite critical worker shortages across a range of UK industries.

Most people who apply for a work visa do so through the points-based system. This sets certain criteria such as qualification level, skill level, and relevant salary threshold. Points are tradable between specific characteristics and employers who wish to sponsor migrants through the skilled worker route must be licensed⁶. This scheme is particularly bureaucratic for all involved: the UK Government must process applications and ensure compliance with terms and conditions of work; applicants must obtain sponsorship; employers, particularly small businesses, have to face the cost of paperwork and sponsorship⁷.

The UK Government has also increased the financial burden on migrant workers. In July 2023, the immigration health surcharge had increased by 417% over five years, and in conjunction with increases to the visa application fee, sent the average cost of a UK visa scheme to well over £1000⁸. As a result, the UK Government has been criticised

for pricing migrants out of visa routes, limiting the attractiveness of the UK to migrant workers, and creating a inequitable system where workers who contribute positively to the UK economy are being burdened with unduly high fees⁹.

Further restrictions to worker visas were announced in December 2023. James Cleverly set out multiple policy changes which included tightening the rules for dependent visas, significantly increasing the base-line minimum salary for Skilled Worker (SW) visas, reviewing Graduate visas, and changing the Shortage Occupation List (SOL)¹⁰. To gain a skilled worker visa, a migrant will now need to earn at least £38,700, an increase of nearly 50%, and the Shortage Occupation List, which allows workers to earn less than the salary threshold, will be reduced and reformed.

These policies were critiqued for demonstrating a one-size-fits-all approach to immigration policy that prioritises net migration reduction above all else¹¹.

Made without industry consultation, multiple sectors expressed shock and concern in reaction to these changes. The trade body Hospitality UK outlined that 95% of hospitality visas issued in 2023 would not be eligible under the new policy changes¹² and the British Meat Processors Association highlighted that the changes would drive up food prices¹³.

At a time when other visa options are being restricted and reduced, youth mobility visa schemes have been expanded. The UK already has successful youth mobility visa schemes in place with several countries outside of the EU, including Australia, Iceland, India, Canada, Japan, Monaco, New Zealand, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan¹⁴. In the year ending September 2023, 23,000 Youth Mobility Scheme Visas were granted, representing 32% of all temporary visas¹⁵.

Despite being unable to come to an agreement on youth mobility in the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement negotiations, the UK Government is exploring bilateral mobility agreements with European countries and are open to reapproaching the issue in the review of the TCA¹⁶.

A meeting of the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly of December 2023 noted the benefits of reciprocal youth mobility between the UK and EU and recommended increased talks between the UK and EU on this matter¹⁷.

Some EU member states have called for a broader mobility deal with the UK covering research and scientific development, suggesting there is a growing appetite in the EU to improve current visa arrangements to benefit both the UK and EU¹⁸.



‘The Assembly “Believes that facilitating reciprocal youth mobility to travel, work and study between the EU and the UK creates valuable opportunities for cultural exchange”



December 2023 meeting of the EU-UK Parliamentary Partnership Assembly

Other notable interventions have increased the profile of youth mobility visa schemes as a viable way to bring more workers to the UK. In July 2023, former Conservative minister, George Eustice MP, called for a reciprocal youth mobility visa scheme with the EU to ease labour shortages and meet the needs of the UK economy. However, his proposal placed a priority on Bulgaria, Romania, and the Baltic states, discriminating between EU nationals, and was seemingly rebuffed by the EU.



4. Labour’s policy on visas

The Labour Party has outlined that they “won’t set an arbitrary target on migration”¹⁹, but it is clear that, like the Conservatives, the party feels the pressure to make the case to the electorate on how it will cut net migration.

In the National Policy Forum platform, Labour sets out plans to reform both the points-based immigration system and the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC)²⁰. In their proposal, the MAC would work closely with national skills bodies and feed into industrial strategy. Labour also set out plans to confront exploitation, with a single enforcement body to enforce workers’ rights and monitor discriminatory practices against migrant workers²¹.

Elsewhere, Labour has committed to a visa waiver for touring artists and negotiation of an EU-wide cultural touring agreement²².

Labour has made other policy announcements on removing the going rate discount for SOL jobs and reviewing the skilled worker salary threshold. Both of these policies have become outdated by the UK Government replacing the SOL and significantly increasing the skilled worker salary threshold.

5. Migration Advisory Committee Recommendations

The Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) is an independent, non-statutory, non-departmental public body that advises the UK Government on migration issues. Recently, the MAC has reviewed the Shortage Occupation List (SOL), and construction and hospitality labour shortages resulting in a number of recommendations to the UK Government on how to improve the immigration policy.

While conducting focused reviews of these visa policies, the MAC has repeatedly asserted its support for the expansion of youth mobility visa schemes.

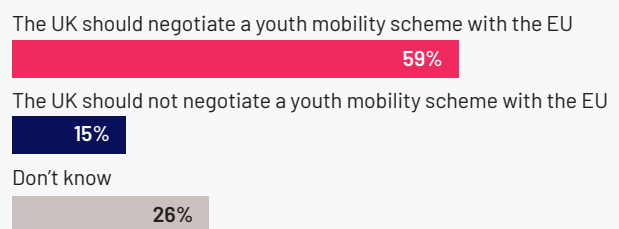
The MAC highlights that the Seasonal Worker Visa (SWV) and the SOL are not suited for many sectors and occupations, due to the type of worker they target and the administrative burden and cost. Instead, the youth mobility visa schemes provides a larger labour pool and would create a more fluid labour market for sectors such as hospitality²³.

In its 2023 Annual Report, the MAC also urged the UK Government to consider the total impact of policy change, rather than keeping a singular focus on net migration, as policy does not act in isolation²⁴. Although there are some overlaps in the recent policy announcements of the UK Government with recent MAC recommendations, there is a clear tension between the UK Government’s focus on reducing net migration and the committee’s evidence-led approach to a sustainable and equitable visa system that meets the UK’s economic needs.

6. What the public thinks

Between 6-8 March 2024, Best for Britain asked over 2000 UK adults if they were in favour of the UK negotiating a youth mobility visa scheme with the EU.

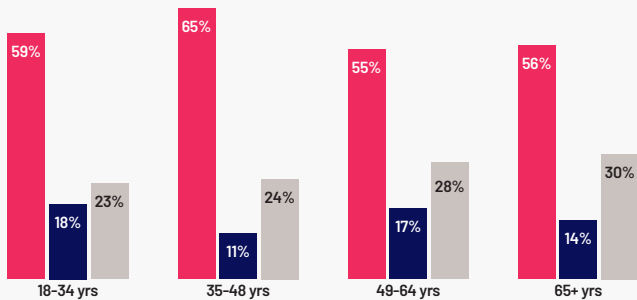
Do you think the UK Government should, or should not, negotiate a ‘Youth Mobility Scheme’ with the European Union?



59% of those polled said that they believed the UK should negotiate a reciprocal youth mobility visa scheme with the EU – while just 15% said that the UK should not negotiate such a scheme. 26% of those polled answered that they did not know how they felt about that question – showing that there is the potential for a large number of people to be persuaded as to the merits of the policy.

Do you think the UK Government should, or should not, negotiate a 'Youth Mobility Scheme' with the European Union?

■ The UK should negotiate a youth mobility scheme with the EU
■ The UK should not negotiate a youth mobility scheme with the EU
■ Don't know

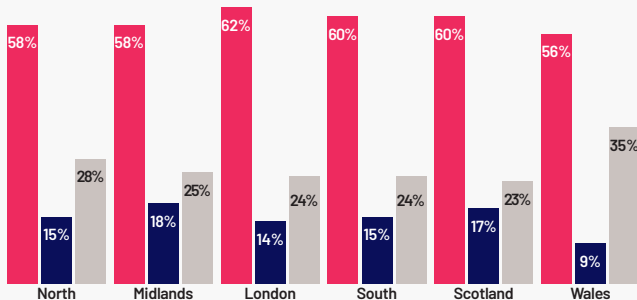


Support for the policy is high across all age groups, with 35-49 year olds showing the highest levels of approval – despite them just missing out on inclusion in the scheme due to their age.

The regional breakdown of support for this policy indicates little variation in support around the country, with all regions typically in favour of a reciprocal UK-EU youth mobility visa scheme.

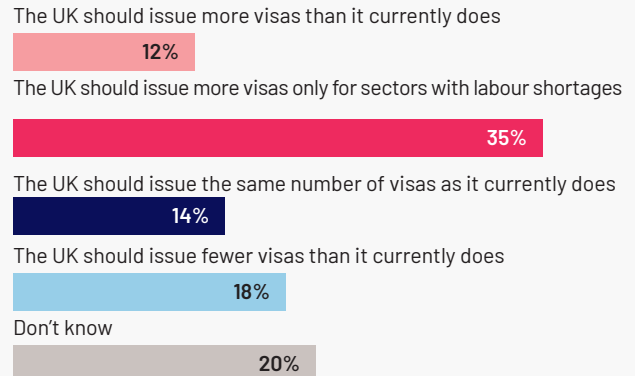
Do you think the UK Government should, or should not, negotiate a 'Youth Mobility Scheme' with the European Union?

■ The UK should negotiate a youth mobility scheme with the EU
■ The UK should not negotiate a youth mobility scheme with the EU
■ Don't know



The same set of UK adults was also polled on whether or not the UK should issue more visas than it currently does. 12% of respondents said that the UK should issue more visas; 35% said this should happen, but only for sectors with labour shortages. Only 18% of respondents believed the UK should offer fewer visas than it currently does. 20% of respondents answered with 'don't know'.

A visa is a legal document that allows individuals from other countries to work, study and temporarily stay, or permanently reside, in the United Kingdom. Which of the following options is closest to your opinion on UK visa policy?



The polling indicates that sentiment on immigration is unsettled but more positive than hardline UK Government rhetoric might suggest. There is room for changing minds when it comes to visa policy and any policy development has the potential to bring people along with it if communicated effectively.

7. The challenges ahead

7.1. Skilled worker shortages

Shortages of skilled workers are a particular challenge for the UK economy currently. The UK Government's present strategy for mitigating these shortages is the Shortage Occupation List (SOL), which specifies the occupations facing worker shortages in the UK and permits people to enter the UK to work in these roles²⁵. Currently, if an occupation is on the list, workers from overseas may be employed at 80% of that occupation's typical salary or 'going rate'.

The UK Government's five point immigration plan, announced in December 2023²⁶, will see the SOL up for reform and replaced with an Immigration Salary List (expected to lead to a reduction in the number of eligible shortage roles) in spring 2024. The new list will no longer allow overseas workers to be paid 80% of the 'going rate' for employment in shortage occupations.



In addition, the UK Government has just increased the salary threshold for the general skilled worker visa from £26,200 to £38,700, in Spring 2024²⁷. For roles that are not included in the SOL – but which in reality are difficult to adequately fill – this new financial imposition is likely to cause further shortages. Employers will be unable to fill certain vacancies with domestic workers because of skills and location mismatches, as well as workforce ill-health and scarcity. But they will also be unable to recruit from abroad as they will not be able to afford to pay the £38,700 minimum. The British Meat Processors Association has noted how, even if these roles were filled by overseas workers, this would likely spark a damaging wave of equal pay claims, with domestic workers potentially being able to prove that they have been discriminated against in salary terms compared to overseas workers who cannot be paid anything less than the £38,700 minimum²⁸.

The impact of these worker shortages cannot be understated. Firms who are either paying over the odds simply to fill vacancies – or which are unable to fill vital roles – will face a series of increased costs and supply chain problems. Some firms may close down, reducing competition within sectors. A lot of these firms, particularly those operating in the agri-food space, are vital for the UK's food supply. Increased costs, reduced competition and reduced resilience will translate into higher prices for consumers – and into inflationary pressure.

The Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) has recommended the abolition of the SOL for a number of reasons, including issues with businesses accessing the scheme and the exploitation of low-paid migrant workers who are in effect tied to their employer for their right to reside in the UK²⁹. Instead, the MAC has suggested that it conducts sector by sector reviews of a range of occupations in order to determine shortages and the potential policy solutions to those shortages.

Reform of the SOL is needed – and the UK Trade and Business Commission has reported on this subject previously. Dr Elitsa Garnizova from LSE has highlighted the need to review the SOL and reconsider whether the current scope of it is effectively capturing and mitigating the worker shortages that are affecting economic resilience. The UKTBC has noted that several sector representatives across agriculture, fishing, construction and the arts (to name but a few) feel that current migration policy is restrictive for their sectors and is limiting their ability to access the workforce they need. Reforming the SOL is one element of that, but rethinking the application of the 'skilled worker' category is another. The move to raise salary thresholds for skilled workers needs to be reversed in order to protect businesses from unaffordable costs and/or severe staff shortages – but more can be done to think expansively about what skilled work actually is and how we assess the need for skills in the UK.

The UK Trade and Business Commission has focused on the need to reform current immigration systems – and on the need to think about immigration and domestic skills as a single, interlinked, strategy. However, the UKTBC recognised that initial steps towards fixing skills

gaps may have to be small. In calling for a youth mobility visa scheme between the UK and EU, the UK Trade and Business Commission has taken the principle of cultural exchange – prized highly by the EU – and recognised that this translates into an exchange of skills and capabilities.

Allowing younger EU citizens to come to the UK for periods of up to five years, without being tied to a specific role, may mean that young, dynamic thinkers who are early on in their careers are able to benefit the UK with the innovation and skills that they can offer. This ‘working holiday’ offer is likely to present significant benefits both for the young professionals who take up the offer and for the UK economy.

Additionally, many of those taking up a youth mobility visa may come to staff shortage occupations, plugging workforce gaps and reducing the pressures associated with a tight labour market. Reform of the immigration system – and of our assessment of the skills needed in the UK – is vital. But it will only happen step by step.

7.2. Labour market tightness

It is not just typically ‘skilled’ roles that are experiencing shortages. Sectors such as hospitality have been repeatedly overlooked in the development of the Shortage Occupation List (SOL)³⁰, and since Brexit many sectors have experienced particularly acute staffing shortages³¹.

Recently, the unemployment rate in the UK has been shrinking³². However, the number of people out of work with long term sickness has seen significant increases in recent years³³.

The current UK Government has focused heavily on the idea that many of these economically inactive people could come back to the workforce³⁴. This, however, ignores the fact that many of those who are economically inactive are simply unable to work – and even where they can work, they may not have the skills or capabilities to fulfil the vacancies available. They may have unpaid caring responsibilities that make it impossible for them to join the workforce.

The reduction in the labour force caused by Brexit and by rising inactivity (some of which is linked to Long Covid³⁵) means that the labour market has become tighter, reducing the resilience of many sectors to shocks such as seasonal sickness. With some sectors having to operate with bare minimum staffing levels, any easing of the overall tightness in the labour market would be welcome.

The UK Trade and Business Commission sees its recommendation of a UK-EU youth mobility visa scheme as a potential means of easing labour market tightness. The Migration Advisory Committee has suggested that a youth mobility visa scheme is a means of easing labour market pressures³⁶.

Bodies such as Hospitality UK have been vocal about their approval for a youth mobility visa scheme with the EU³⁷ – and even in other sectors which may not stand to directly benefit, there is an understanding that any reduction in the overall tightness of the labour market is helpful.

With a youth mobility scheme as a first step, there must also be a recognition that broadening the definition of what qualifies as skilled work (and not necessarily making a reductive tie between salary level and skill level) might be a way to reform inward migration for work in a productive way.



7.3 Seasonal worker shortages

Post-Brexit, seasonal workers remain an important part of the UK economy, particularly in agriculture, and uncertainty in the operation and numbers of the scheme have been an ongoing issue.

Seasonal workers are a labour group which is by nature, transient and flexible, and UK farmers have relied on European migrant workers for decades³⁸. Post-Brexit, the UK Government set up the temporary Seasonal Worker visa scheme to recruit seasonal workers from overseas but have warned farmers that they should not rely on the scheme in the long-term³⁹.

The current quota has 45,000 places a year (plus 2,000 for poultry workers) and could be increased by 10,000 should it be deemed necessary. While the UK Government had stressed their intention to gradually decrease the quota, hoping that domestic workers would take the place of overseas workers, they have had to increase the quota in both 2023 and 2024. Looking towards the future, it is not clear what scheme or visa pathway will be offered in 2025, and the main points-based visa routes remain inappropriate for this type of work.

The scheme has also taken an unexpected shock by the Russian invasion into Ukraine. Ukrainians made up 67% of the temporary workers issued with the visa between April 2020 and the end of March 2022⁴⁰. In conjunction with increased energy and fertiliser costs, martial law in Ukraine has prevented Ukrainian men from their usual employment⁴¹. As a result, the proportion of Asian seasonal workers taking up the scheme has increased.

While food producers across Europe are facing numerous increased input costs, the additional stressor of lack of seasonal labour is just one of many post-Brexit challenges that is putting UK farmers at a competitive disadvantage. In November 2023, Food Standards Agency data shows that the food supply chain in the UK has consistently suffered from weak supply in migrant labour and a lack of incentives to attract domestic workers post-Brexit⁴². While the UK Government may be keen to urge farmers to rely on automation or domestic labour, in many instances the technology and skills do not exist.

Considering the significant impact on food security and food inflation, the lack of seasonal workers is only going to exacerbate issues that are contributing to the cost of living and will push domestic producers into even smaller profit margins that threaten their future resilience.

With the new employer-sponsored system, concerns around migrant exploitation have increased. Workers from overseas, already vulnerable by the transient and low-paid nature of their employment, are now tied to their employer for sponsorship and, should they wish to move, only have 60 days to secure employment before their visa becomes invalid. Language barriers and lack of local or UK institutional knowledge can leave workers unsure where to turn for help if they are being exploited and nervous at what the consequences might include if they do speak out⁴³. The Work Rights Centre argues that the current visa system is ill-equipped to mitigate the risk of migrant worker exploitation and the prevalence of migrant worker exploitation has increased under the new frameworks⁴⁴.

In the latter half of 2023, a landmark employment tribunal saw the first person on a seasonal worker visa to take legal action against a farm. The Bureau for Investigative Journalism and the Independent found that 44% of workers interviewed as part of investigations on farms conducted by the Home Office between 2021 and 2022 reported welfare issues, including racism, wage theft, and threats of being sent back home⁴⁵. As further legal claims are launched and more reports of exploitation are released, the pressure will be growing on the UK Government to confront this issue and consider whether it is doing due diligence to protect migrant workers.

The UK Trade and Business Commission recommended that the UK Government must look at seasonal workers in a more pragmatic way and ensure the needs of different sectors, such as agriculture and horticulture, are recognised within wider visa policy⁴⁶.

The UKTBC has called the UK Government to prioritise a comprehensive review of the implementation and uptake of the Seasonal Worker Visa scheme to determine areas for improvement.

While not commissioned by the UK Government, the MAC has begun an inquiry into the SWV considering it a timely review given that the scheme has been in operation for a number of years. The MAC will be considering the rules, size and cost of the scheme, the potential for exploitation and poor labour market practice, the economic rationale and the long-run need for such a scheme⁴⁷. It is likely that the recommendations made by the MAC will increase pressure on the UK Government to confront reports of exploitation and make long-term commitments to addressing seasonal worker shortages.

Agricultural organisations, including the NFU, have called for the UK Government to make a five year commitment to the scheme, or its replacement, in order to provide certainty for businesses and extend the scheme to last nine months⁴⁸.

The UKTBC has also stressed that a Youth Mobility Visa Scheme would enable greater flexibility of migrant workers in the UK. The scheme is less bureaucratic than the SWV but it also limits exploitation by ensuring that a worker's visa is not dependent on their employment status.

The Migration Observatory compared the advantages of a YMS and a low-skilled work visa, finding that while a youth mobility visa scheme may not be able to target particular markets, this 'working holiday' visa was a useful way of increasing the overall labour supply and was significantly simpler to manage with lower administrative burden⁴⁹.

A drawback of the youth mobility visa scheme is that it does not set up a licensing system in which all employers must be approved by the Home Office. This, in theory, is a mechanism that should protect migrant workers, however with the lack of resourcing to upholding workers safeguards, has proved ineffective in the case of the SWV.

Experts have highlighted that unless there is significantly more accountability for employers of foreign workers, then a youth mobility scheme could prevent extreme cases of exploitation as workers are not bound to their employers⁵⁰.



7.4. Cultural sector workers

The cultural sector contributed £9.5 billion in gross value added to the UK economy in 2022⁵¹ and the UK is one of only three net exporters of music in the world. The cultural sector is also unique for its contribution to the health and social fabric of the UK, and significantly punches above its weight in terms of creating and supporting the UK's soft power.

In 2019 the Association of British Orchestras estimated that the UK's orchestras generated 12% of their total earned income from touring in the EU and UK Music data found that for UK artists, the EU market was four times the size of the US (the second biggest) in terms of number of performances⁵³.

Since the UK left the EU, there has been a significant shift in UK artists' ability to work in the EU. The Independent Society of Musicians report in 2023 that 47.4% of surveyed musicians said they had less work in the EU than they did before Brexit and 27.8% said that they now had none at all⁵⁴. Best for Britain research also found that the number of British musicians booked for EU festivals is down by a third since the UK left the EU⁵⁵.

While some countries have visa exemptions for performers and artists, this is not consistent. A touring individual or group will have to navigate a range of different systems for both themselves and their goods in each European country. Evidence presented to the UK Trade and Business Commission indicates that this complication makes touring unviable and they are already facing challenges due to lost income and partnerships⁵⁶.

The cultural workforce is also particularly vulnerable to touring and export barriers, as it is made up of 95% of sole traders or small enterprises, who might often lack the capacity and resources to deal with complex and expensive touring arrangements⁵⁷. Of the cultural workforce, 29% are freelance – compared to 15% of the whole UK workforce – which is indicative of the nature of cultural work that is often short term and relies on the flexibility of its workforce. The cultural labour force is highly skilled and needs to maintain a level of flexibility in order to remain competitive in the industry.

These changes in right to work and ease of access have therefore put the UK's cultural workers at a disadvantage and restricted the UK's world leading cultural institutions' ability to easily draw from talent in the EU. With the UK's cultural exports to the EU progressing at a slower rate than non-EU countries post-pandemic, it is evident that the UK's cultural sector is losing irreplaceable cultural relationships as a result of post-Brexit touring and trading difficulty⁵⁸.

The UKTBC has suggested a cultural visa waiver agreement with the EU for those working in the cultural sector on a temporary basis. This scheme would allow artists, performers, fashion professionals and other cultural professionals to move between the UK and EU for the purposes of ad-hoc work. We also suggest further bilateral cultural agreements for work permits are negotiated with individual EU Member States where necessary.

A cultural visa waiver for UK-EU creatives would not require changes to the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, and it would provide opportunities for collaboration and cultural exchange, enhancing the competitiveness of the UK's creative industries and strengthening the UK's cultural ties with the EU as a whole.

A cultural mobility agreement with member states could also be an important step to further bilateral cooperation.

In the cultural industry, a youth mobility visa scheme with the EU would allow increased exchange of workers. Easing the pressures of expensive and bureaucratic access to cultural workers, this scheme could strengthen the cultural sector and also form deeper ties between the UK and the EU.

A youth mobility visa scheme would be particularly successful at providing a pathway for young creatives to work in another European country for the short term to build up a career. The increased ease in which young European artists and young professionals could come and work in the UK would help forge cultural and collaborative relationships across UK creative businesses. These connections would most likely extend far beyond the possible five years of stay, and create cultural and professional connections that would last between individuals for their whole career.

Finally, as a youth mobility visa scheme is primarily a cultural project there would likely be wider holistic benefits across both societies engaged in the reciprocal scheme. For example, young people will be exposed to the history and culture of their resident country, increasing engagement with and appreciation of that country's cultural output in the future.

8. A UK-EU Youth Mobility Visa Scheme

A good immigration policy works for the economy, yet current UK Government policies are putting economic resilience at risk. A failure to use immigration to reduce tightness in the labour market and to fill vital skills gaps will leave the UK at risk of longstanding inflationary pressures.

The UK Trade and Business Commission's recommendations on visas represent a sensible approach to beginning to develop a pragmatic immigration policy. Taking initial steps while attitudes towards immigration are challenged, tested and even changed, is a good way to show the public how certain more open immigration policies can have positive economic and social effects.

A UK-EU youth mobility visa scheme is a really important first step in immigration policy reform. Polling highlights the existing public support for such a measure, and we know that the introduction of such a scheme would allow for increased flexibility in the labour market, without adding to overall immigration figures, on account of immigration under such a scheme being viewed as a 'working holiday' as opposed to long term resettlement.

The policy would also facilitate cultural exchange between the UK and EU – something that has undoubtedly been lost to many young people in the aftermath of Brexit. Further to this, the notion of cultural exchange is in itself an incentive to the EU to pursue such a scheme.

If the UK works constructively with the EU to develop and implement a youth mobility visa scheme, it may be the case that the EU will also see the UK as having made an important concession that could bring the EU to the table for further talks on matters to improve the UK-EU relationship.



Below, we set out some considerations that must be taken into account in the implementation of a youth mobility visa scheme policy.

8.1. Bilateral vs EU wide youth mobility visa schemes

While the current UK Government seems to have made overtures in the direction of a youth mobility visa scheme with the EU, progress has stalled.

In August 2023, reports emerged that the UK Government was engaging in talks with individual EU member states to discuss reciprocal bilateral schemes for youth mobility⁵⁹. However, the EU has expressed concerns with individual EU states negotiating bilaterally with the UK on trade-linked matters⁶⁰.

Indeed, Catherine Barnard, Professor of EU and Employment law at the University of Cambridge, told the UKTBC that the legal competence for negotiating youth mobility visa schemes currently lies with individual member states of the EU⁶¹. However, the EU fears that member states negotiating youth mobility visa schemes directly with the UK has the potential to set a precedent which sees the European Commission bypassed in negotiations with the UK.

8.2. Making the scheme accessible and attractive

The UKTBC made clear that a UK-EU youth mobility visa scheme would need to be reviewed on an annual basis to evaluate the number of young people taking up the scheme and identify any trends or patterns in the types of industries or sectors they are working in.

One of the particular drawbacks of a youth mobility visa scheme is that it cannot target sectors or occupations specifically, and in order to ensure it is working for the UK economy and those who are participating in it, there will need to be frequent, evidence-led reviews to evaluate if the scheme is accessible and attractive.

The application fee for a youth mobility visa scheme increased by 15% in October 2023 and the immigration health surcharge rose again to £1,035 a year on 6th February 2024⁶². This means the UK immigration fees have increased significantly above inflation, and are unusually high compared to the immigration fees of other countries such as Canada, Germany, France and the USA⁶³. The UK Government has been criticised for making immigration schemes less affordable and less accessible; potentially pricing the UK out of a competitive international labour market.⁶⁴

At the same time, it is important to consider the UK nationals who will utilise the bilateral scheme to live and work abroad. The UK Government should remain keen to address any barriers that young people from the UK are facing to accessing the scheme, and could consider offering fee waivers or grants to young people and young professionals from a low-socioeconomic background.

9. Conclusion

In a complex post-Brexit visa policy landscape, a UK-EU youth mobility visa scheme is both popular and fits the needs of the UK economy.

At the same time, implementing a UK-EU youth mobility visa scheme signals that the UK values the cultural and skills-based benefits of mobility for young people and young professionals.

Mobility goes both ways, and the benefits of enabling young people from the UK to experience other cultures and develop skills on account of this will be significant for the UK's economy and outlook, allowing the UK to benefit from an exchange of skills and cultures that it would not have otherwise experienced.

While the UK's migrant workforce has gone through multiple shocks in the past few years, expanded youth mobility visa schemes offer a way to ensure the labour pool is more resilient and a less expensive and bureaucratic route to come and live and work in the UK.

A UK-EU youth mobility visa scheme will show the UK's commitment to closer cultural ties with the EU and perhaps pave the way for closer economic partnerships. Both the UK and the EU stand to benefit from the opportunity to have closer cultural, educational, and professional ties.



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