EU-UK YOUTH STRONGER TOGETHER



Youth recommendations on the future of EU-UK youth relations

Background Paper

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The *EU-UK Youth Stronger Together* report represents the voice of the UK youth sector and sets out key recommendations for the future of EU-UK relations in the field of youth.

The consultation was part of the <u>British Council's Stronger Together programme</u>, which aims to connect young people and youth organisations across the UK and the EU in meaningful and productive ways.

The report was informed by a consultation carried out from mid-2023 to mid-2024, directly involving more than 120 youth organisations and young people (aged 16 - 30) across the UK, as well as with sector specialists and with the support of our Youth Advisory Board. The consultation also included youth organisations from across the EU, who have contributed their perspectives and who support the final recommendations.

The picture is clear. Young people and youth organisations in the UK want a closer relationship with the EU, and their peers in the EU want the same thing. They want to connect and collaborate more, and see the value of this for their countries, their organisations and for the lives and concerns of young people.

This background paper details the process of the consultation through which the Youth Recommendations were developed, and the conversations, priorities and ideas that emerged. It includes examples and case studies of experience, ideas and existing good practice from across the four nations of the UK and from the EU.

Context

The youth recommendations should be understood in the wider context of young people's lives and the current social, political, economic and environmental situation in which they are living and learning.

Young people are interested in and affected by specific issues, and they want to be part of making a positive difference. Some issues that emerged strongly through the consultation include climate change, the cost of living, economic inequalities, mental health, mobility, violence against women and girls, and conflict. In the views of young people, many of these are transnational issues, affecting both the UK and EU member states, which require a collective approach.

"The UK and the EU share so many issues. They're so compatible. For example, with climate change or the skills shortage. I'm surprised we don't have a more cohesive approach to tackling these issues. It's not just the UK, it's a global issue. It's a shame we not getting young people from the UK and EU together to look at these issues, and skills courses, and thinking together how we can change things."

Young people talk passionately about their concerns, and the desire to be involved in change and to be heard on the issues they care about, however the percentage of young people involved in formal social action, volunteering or political participation in the UK is in decline.

The reasons for this are multiple, and it is not within the scope of the report to detail these, but some groups of young people in particular experience both visible and hidden barriers to engagement, including financial, time pressures, rural isolation and lack of local opportunities. The EU has in the past provided a significant amount of support to overcome these barriers and widen participation and it is hoped that the implementation of these recommendations will

¹ All unattributed quotes are from interview and focus group participants

enable more UK young people to become involved formally and non-formally on local and global issues they care about.

Young people are anxious about the future

Throughout our focus groups young people voiced their fears and concerns about the future. In some cases, this stems from direct experience of prejudice, unemployment, financial struggles, knife crime and NHS challenges, as well as the wider context of economic uncertainty, environmental crises, political instability and conflict, particularly in Gaza and Ukraine. The promise of generational social mobility has diminished or been lost and for many young people, "the world feels like a scary place."

Although there were some reasons given for optimism, for example about mental health being less stigmatised, the top three words, when asked to distill their feelings about the future were "pessimistic", "confused" and "hopeless".

These attitudes are reflected in many studies. For example, in the Youth Voice Census Report 2024 from Youth Employment UK, out of 5,000 young people aged 11 – 30, 3 in 5 indicated feeling anxious in their daily life, and they were concerned that this anxiety would negatively impact their work and futures. (Youth Employment UK, 2024)

Young people explained to us that distancing relations with the EU is a contributing factor, adding to a sense of uncertainty and anxiety about the future, including their own trajectories.

"It's scary without this [relationship with the EU], especially now with all the wars going on. It would be nice not to worry about these things – it's a lot to think about at the back of your minds constantly"

Young people feel disenfranchised

As part of the EU-UK Youth Stronger Together project, in May 2023 YouGov fielded a poll of a representative sample of 1,010 young Britons, for European Movement International (EMI), to understand the attitudes of young British citizens towards the European Union.

The research found that, "a plurality of young Britons (45%) are consistent supporters of democracy... and another quarter of youth in the United Kingdom (28%) are inconsistent supporters of democracy", although there are suggestions that this waning. As a comparison just 29% of young people in the US are consistent supporters of democracy. The research also found that, on the whole, British young people prefer a cooperative approach to foreign relations rather than a nationalistic one. (EMI, 2023).

However, by more than a 3 to 1 margin, "young Britons are more likely to feel disenfranchised. They are more likely to agree that (1) people like me are being left behind, (2) people like me do not benefit enough from the United Kingdom's economic success, (3) sometimes I feel like a stranger in my own country, (4) our best days in the United Kingdom are behinds us, and (5) economic and social inequality are growing in the United Kingdom." (EMI, 2023)

Alongside this, young Britons also feel disempowered. "Only 9% of British youth feel strongly that "they can make a difference in how the United Kingdom's problems are fixed," And furthermore, almost half of young Britons (46%) have no trust at all in the government of the United Kingdom. By comparison, we see greater trust in the EU. Only 34% of young Britons do not trust the European Union. (EMI, 2023)

The fact that only 5% of young people from the UK thought that politicians listened to their views on Brexit (Jack Petchey Foundation, 2019), further adds to the sense of disenfranchisement, and gives us an idea of the social and political landscape for young people in which the consultation was situated.

Leaving the EU has had a damaging impact on young people

Young people in the UK believe that withdrawal from the EU has been negative for the country and for them personally. The European Movement International research found that 44% of young people thought Brexit was fairly or very bad for them personally, and "64% in total, think Brexit was bad or very bad for the United Kingdom."

"Selfishly, my job has been made harder. And it's [Brexit] made everything more expensive, more difficult and more miserable."

Our consultation reflects the findings in the research that when thinking about the impact of Brexit, young people consider the situation of the country as a whole as much as their own circumstances. Participants talked about the impact on trade, job mobility and the economy; as well as security concerns and the how the UK, EU and member states are less ability to work together on issues of shared concern.

The impact on young people's mobility and study and work opportunities was a central theme and there was a tangible sense of loss, including from young people who had not had access to these opportunities in the past. Participants described the feeling of doors being shut, avenues cut off, and not having the same opportunities as previous generations.

"I feel it in my personal life too. I can't move. It's not the same freedom to move and I really feel a sense of loss around that, and that our country is less diverse."

The issue of intensifying racism, xenophobia and homophobia in the UK was mentioned in different ways by all the groups. The conversations focused on the experience and rights of LGBTQ young people and young people from black and minority ethnic young people, how these rights are supported by the EU and how the situation has worsened post-Brexit. There was a general feeling that Brexit has eroded human and civil rights and that being closer to the EU would help.

"My parents are European and grew up feeling very proud to be British and European and also felt like there were some freedoms the UK gave me that perhaps Europe didn't. And I absolutely don't feel that anymore."

"To me personally, the EU means a collective mindset. It feels that we are part of something bigger and connected with others. With this was a sense of loss of something that represented unity and positive values."

One issue picked up by the Youth Advisory Board and stressed as a priority by some of the respondents was Violence against women and girls. A young reporter from the Stronger Together programme concluded, "The evidence is there: Brexit has negatively impacted efforts to combat sexual violence against women and girls in the UK, weakening vital support systems and legal tools. The loss of EU funding, data-sharing platforms and the European Arrest Warrant has left the UK with significant gaps in resources to protect victims." (Caoimhe Clements, Young Journalist, 2025)

The impact on youth organisations was also felt keenly and organisations – from large national agencies to local community groups - described the increasingly challenging environment they were experiencing, exacerbated by Brexit and the loss of funding that accompanied it. To underscore this, The British Youth Council (BYC), the National Youth Council of the UK, is threatened with closure after more than 75 years. As well as supporting youth voice in the UK, BYC also supported elected young representatives to European and EU forums.

"Brexit's been very confusing for Northern Ireland. A majority voted to remain and its left young people, and people in general, a bit in limbo. There is a unique situation here, when we talk about the relationship with young people in the UK and EU. We have a land border, and you can walk into the EU. There's a lot of irritation for young people."

Young people and youth organisations want a closer relationship with the EU All focus group participants agreed that the EU was important to the UK, and almost everyone said they would like to see a closer relationship (with less than 10% stating that it should remain the same), with many expressing strong feelings. These feelings were based on their knowledge of the relationship and their feeling of connection to the Union, but very much influenced by what they saw as the overwhelmingly negative fallout from Brexit, as described above.

When asked, "how would you describe EU-UK youth relations in one word?", these were some of the responses.



Many participants, though not all, expressed a desire for the UK to rejoin the EU as the best possible course of action; however, the discussions centered around the possibilities outside of the EU and within the scope of the Withdrawal Agreement. Participants identified a desire for closer relationship between the EU and UK in future, with many describing the importance of developing a win-win mindset, with much closer alignment on shared interests such as sustainability, trade, freedom of movement. Some highlighted that EU policies in the UK political system would be reassuring.

Other studies reinforce our findings. The British Council's latest Next Generation Report found that, "Four in five (81%) young people in the UK believe it is important to maintain positive relations with other European countries following the UK's exit from the EU." (British Council, 2024). The YouGov report states that, "A majority of British youth (52%) select Europe as the most important partner or partnership for the United Kingdom (over the USA, Commonwealth and others), and 8 in 10 think maintaining close relations with EU is important." In the follow up question it reports that, "a total of 72% of British youth agree building a new, stronger relationship with the European Union is important."

Young people and youth organisations in the UK believe that closer ties is good for everyone: for young people, for the sector, for the country and for the EU. For young people there were three themes that dominated the rational for this: mobility, education and employment. These are reflected in the recommendations, but the overall message is that Europe is our most important partner, we are too distant from Europe now and Britain does better when we work with other countries.

"This links to trade, links to migration, links to a more interconnected world and interconnected Europe and I think that's what we need."

There is widespread support for closer EU-UK relations

The Recommendations are framed within the withdrawal agreement. The ask is not to go back, but to ensure the best outcomes for young people and their countries and communities within current arrangements. And the door from the EU side appears open.

The EU recognises the mutual benefit of closer youth relations, evidenced in the recommendation for a Council Decision to open negotiations towards a UK-EU agreement on youth mobility. (European Commission, 2024)

And according to the European Economic and Social Committee, "Strengthening ties between young people and youth organisations in the European Union and the United Kingdom will have tangible positive effects on a generation of Europeans disproportionately affected by the consequences of Brexit." (EESC, 2024).

As a recent European Parliament Think Tank briefing explained, there is mutual goodwill towards a reset of UK-EU relations and a priority to address youth mobility from the EU. "The change of leadership in the UK... and the emergence of a new political cycle in the EU for 2024-2029, the reset of EU-UK relations has increasingly been gaining momentum. While the UK has made clear that it will not return to the single market or customs union, the government of Keir Starmer has started to engage diplomatically with the EU, with a reset of the relationship as its priority... The EU's interests include improving mobility into the UK (including youth mobility), maintaining fisheries access, and ensuring rights of EU citizens in the UK." (EU Parliament, December 2024) These recommendations offer mutually beneficial approaches to UK-EU youth relations through specific opportunities for young people, rather than free movement or migration.

Recent recommendations from the Domestic Advisory Group also stressed the benefits of youth mobility and for young people to be involved in post-Brexit dialogue. (See Recommendation 1)

There are also many initiatives within the youth sector and wider civil society, in the UK and in the EU, to bring different actors together and facilitate dialogue on UK-EU relations. Leading umbrella organisations, including national representative organisations in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the UK, as well as the European Youth Forum have prioritised and developed policy on these issues. These organisations are also represented on the Advisory Board of this consultation.

Reflecting the broader shift towards more warm and open dialogue, this consultation was carried out in a spirit of shared purpose; moving forward from divisive Brexit debates, to work together for a positive future for young people and for UK-EU relations.

"Brexit can feel really negative, but all the things we've spoken about – all these recommendations are really really positive. It's a positive step forward, not looking back"

"This is a forward-looking piece of work... how do we do those good things with young people, without getting drowned in the weeds of Brexit."

The Youth Recommendations

These recommendations are focused on strengthening opportunities for young people from the UK and EU to connect, communicate and collaborate, especially through the use of learning mobility programmes, and to support for young people's participation. There is a clear desire for this, and significant opportunities to move towards a more supportive, joined-up environment, and to make a positive impact.

There are four central, interconnected recommendations. We call on the UK Government, devolved governments, and EU Institutions to:

- 1. Advance negotiations on UK-EU youth learning mobility.
- 2. Strengthen opportunities for cultural exchange and mutual understanding between young people in the UK and the EU.
- 3. Strengthen youth participation in public debate and policy dialogue on the future of EU-UK relations.
- 4. Support a UK-EU network of youth organisations for ongoing dialogue and collaboration.

Each recommendation is important as a standalone priority; however, they are mutually reinforcing. For example, building trust and understanding supports better and more diverse collaboration, supporting inclusion in learning mobility helps widen participation in policy dialogue; and a network of EU and UK youth organisations would help strengthen all of these recommendations into the future.

Objectives for the Recommendations Report

It is hoped that these Recommendations give voice to young people and the youth sector in ongoing efforts to strengthen EU-UK relations, and highlight the needs, priorities and possibilities for young people. The Recommendations report and this Background Paper provide:

- Evidence of the value and mutual benefit of EU-UK relations to young people and youth organisations, particularly learning mobility, to support UK-EU dialogue, wherever that may be happening.
- Impetus to the UK government to advance dialogue with EU about learning mobility
- Documents to share as a voice of the UK youth sector on UK-EU relations
- Additional content and evidence for other organisations to use for their own advocacy
- Information for youth sector organisations to deepen their understanding about European and international work and its value to young people and organisations
- Content for the proposed EU-UK network of youth organisations to work from.
- A knowledge base and foundation for future EU / UK Stronger Together work.

Consultation process

The consultation ran from June 2023 to September 2024. 123 youth organisations and young people across the UK took part in the consultation directly, with additional input from representatives from EU youth organisations. Many more young people contributed through surveys, vox pop questions and attending Stronger Together events.

Throughout all phases of the consultation the process has been shaped and supported by a Youth Advisory Board (YAB). The YAB comprised representatives of national and EU organisations.

- British Youth Council Maurizio Cuttin, Zara Okusi
- European Youth Forum Ismael Paez Civico, Lauren Mason
- Northern Ireland Youth Forum Oisín Tomás Reilly, Cohen Taylor, Aoife Murphy
- · Scottish Youth Parliament Matt McDonald
- Senedd Cymru / Welsh Youth Parliament Amber Lewis
- Young European Movement UK Stella Mavropoulou, Klajdi Selimi, Cecilia Jastrzembska

The report and recommendations have also been informed by research carried out by You Gov about young people's experience and perspectives about the EU, in partnership with the European Movement International.

Phase 1: Understanding the Context What is the current situation and what are the priorities for young people and youth organisations? June 2023 – June 2024

- <u>Initial consultation at national events</u>. Interviews with representatives from youth
 organisations at events in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. We asked about their
 current and future priorities and needs, their perspectives about relations with the EU, and
 how closer EU relations might contribute to their aims. We also asked what else existed that
 supported EU-UK relations, what gaps there were and what they would like to see in the
 future.
- <u>In-person focus groups</u> with young people and representatives from youth organisations from across the UK at the 2023 Youth Gathering organised by the EU Delegation to the UK in London.
- Online focus groups for young people. Two focus groups with a specially recruited cross-section of young people, aged 18 24, from across the UK.

Phase 2: Shaping the Recommendations What specific recommendations would further young people and youth organisations' needs and priorities? June 2024 – September 2024

- Online focus groups with representatives from a cross-section of youth organisations from across the UK and EU to inform the initial recommendations. Participants responded to initial themes identified in Phase 1 and helped shape the key headline recommendations, sharing ideas about what might be included in the details of each recommendation.
- Recommendations review, through a Partnership with Dr Dan Moxon of People Dialogue and Change. Dr Moxon advised on the framing and drafting of the recommendations in the context of the current policy landscape and other initiatives in the EU and UK.

Phase 3: Validation and Endorsement Are the recommendations *relevant*, and how could they be more *specific* and more *targeted*? September 2024 – October 2024

- Online national focus groups. Representatives of youth organisations took part in five focus
 groups, one for Northern Ireland, Scotland, England, Wales and the EU. Participants were
 asked to validate and question the recommendations and how they might be made more
 specific and targeted to work for them. They also gave us insights into the national /
 devolved context and specific examples of needs and opportunities for change and what
 might be possible.
- <u>Interviews with targeted organisations</u>. We talked directly to representatives from organisations active on EU-UK relations that had not been involved in the consultation up to this point.

Phase 4: Dissemination and Action Oct 2024 – Ongoing

- Youth Dialogue Event. The Stronger Together programme participated at the EU-UK 2024
 Youth Dialogue event organised by the EU Delegation to the UK in London in November
 2024. Members of the Youth Advisory Board presented the findings and recommendations
 at the event and facilitated side events on the issues in the report.
- Workshop to inform the EU-UK Network of Youth Organisations. We brought 30 representatives from UK and EU youth organisations together in London to work on the Terms of Reference for the proposed network.

The British Council and partners are now disseminating the recommendations, continuing the conversations with stakeholders and supporting the establishment of the EU-UK Network of Youth Organisations, handing ownership over to representatives from youth organisations.

See list of organisations directly involved in focus groups and interviews on page 28.

Recommendation 1: Youth Learning Mobility

The UK Government and EU institutions should advance negotiations on UK-EU youth learning mobility

With a view to reaching an agreement that will:

- 1. Pave the way for the UK to rejoin the Erasmus+ programme, while fostering the broader development of concrete UK-EU learning mobility opportunities afforded to young people regardless of background.
- 2. **Provide support and resourcing for youth organisations and youth workers on both sides** to enable the development of quality UK-EU learning mobility projects for and with young people. This should include access to sustainable funding and support to participate in international networks of youth organisations and youth workers.
- 3. Ensure that future UK-EU learning mobility opportunities for young people are inclusive, well supported, and accessible to all, regardless of background. This should include funding specifically for projects that aim to engage diverse groups of young people and address the unique challenges they face in accessing mobility opportunities.
- 4. Alongside consideration of the Erasmus+ programme, and to address short-term needs through a transition period, **take account of the potential for:**
 - The promotion and further development of **existing UK mobility schemes** such as Turing, Taith, and the UK youth mobility scheme. However, the Turing scheme is not considered a replacement for Erasmus+, as it is focused on higher education and because it does not support reciprocal exchange of young people.
 - The development and use of **additional complementary programmes** to support EU-UK youth mobility, such as Creative Europe.
 - The current Erasmus+ programme to better involve 'Third Countries' ¹associated to the programme, which may include the UK in the short-term.
 - The investment in **shorter term projects for maintaining EU-UK youth relatio**ns in the non-formal education sector, collaboration between youth organisations and facilitation of youth dialogue.

There was a depth of support for learning mobility in general, and the Erasmus+ programme in particular, in recognition of the value it brings to young people, youth organisations, communities and the UK as a whole.

The loss of Erasmus+ was felt very deeply by many organisations in the UK, a feeling shared by counterparts in the EU. Many wanted to know why the UK government was not engaging in Erasmus+, especially as the UK is one of the few countries in Europe and the rest of the world that misses out on these opportunities.

Participants shared many personal stories of the benefits of these programmes - for themselves as young people, and about young people they work with. Many of the groups talked about how they bring a sense of unity, broaden horizons and connect across cultures. It was also noted that after Covid, with the curtailment of travel and the chance to meet and mix with new people, these opportunities are even more valuable.

Below are some of the key themes that emerged from the consultation about what was most valued and what is believed to be missing or at risk in the current situation.

Widening participation

Supported learning mobility, where young people's participation is facilitated and responsive to their needs – for example through co-creation with target groups of young people - can enable all young people to access these powerful learning opportunities, not only those with existing networks and resources. However, this inclusion requires support, and support requires investment.

"This situation risks creating a divide in the UK, where global citizenship becomes a privilege of the wealthy, potentially fostering a generation of more insular thinkers in an increasingly interconnected world". (British Council, Next Generation UK, 2024)

"Not just because of Brexit, to any sort of youth participation – anything to do with use of free time. Its everything. It's the cost of living crisis, it's the long shadow of covid. Everything impacts how inclusive things are, and it's the demographics who are already were marginalised who are impacted the most by all these extra variables"

Collaboration between young people

Issues that young people shared as important to them, and on which they would value EU collaboration with their peers included climate change, discrimination, youth voice, employability, violence against women and girls and LGBTQ+ rights.

Learning mobility facilitates collaboration between young activists, entrepreneurs and professionals, creating the conditions for innovation and collective impact. It also strengthens the UK youth sector through the exchange of skills, ideas and approaches between youth workers and organisations, as well as providing investment into new programmes in response to changing needs.

"We are diverse. My take on climate change is not the same as yours. We need to talk about it together. We become enlightened through exchange and understand more about what we can do in our organisations and local communities. When we work on it mutually, we can change the world."

"Yes! I love the opportunity to meet other young people working on issues such as climate and social justice to learn from them"

Strengthening UK and EU youth sectors

Participants explained their experience of how learning mobility strengthen the youth sector, through the exchange of skills, ideas and approaches between youth workers and organisations. Erasmus+ and other programmes provided investment into the sector and supported new programmes in response to the changing need of young people. It also funded specific learning and exchange opportunities for youth workers and organisations which were highly valued.

Civic engagement and youth participation

Participants spoke about how local democracy in the UK was strengthened through Erasmus+ programmes, with its emphasis on youth voice; as well as opportunities to engage in national and European democracy. This was further valued for the priority given to young people with fewer opportunities and the additional funding available for accessibility, for example, sign language interpreters and support for carers to accompany young people.

Trips to EU institutions were mentioned as valuable, as they help young people to understand the workings and get involved in opportunities. These activities help support young people's understanding and involvement in the future of UK-EU relations. (See Recommendation 3)

It was also noted that despite the UK's withdrawal from the EU, it is still part of Europe and still a part of the Council of Europe, which has its own institutions, initiatives and opportunities.

Limitation of existing and future schemes

While recognising efforts made to address some of the gaps left by leaving the Erasmus programme, The Turing Scheme was widely criticised as a poor substitute that is limited to specific groups of people and does not serve the majority of young people or the youth sector.

"Turing only covers a small slice of what Erasmus Plus offered: mainly university, college, and

school trips. But it's only one-way, and it doesn't include youth exchanges, sports, volunteering, or lifelong learning. Plus, it misses out on professional development, training, and partnerships between organisations. So, Turing is just a partial substitute, and not a great one at that." (Centre for International Leadership and Learning)

The Taith programme in Wales was much more well received and participants from Wales shared lessons from Taith that they felt might be valuable to any future youth learning mobility scheme.

Challenges

Despite the universal support for Erasmus+, we heard a number of stories of the challenges of engaging with the programme too.

Whilst it was clear that Erasmus+ facilitated greater inclusion in EU and international exchange, providing opportunities to young people who would never otherwise have had the chance, there were some specific areas where organisations felt improvement was needed. They described the need for funding to "get over the line". Smaller and rural organisations in particularly said that they struggle to find the resources for local transport and other costs not covered.

"It's not just about being in a rural area. But with people coming from different places, it costs a lot just to get everyone in one place to travel together."

"Just reaching the port or exit point to reach the EU. They've cut the flights from Cardiff to Paris, so you have to go out of Wales to travel. A train to Swansea, then to London, then Eurostar, and there's not enough money for the whole journey." So, organisations need to find additional funding just to reach the exit point."

Bureaucracy was another challenge highlighted. The administrative burden was felt to be quite high for the amount of funding on offer, particularly organisations with limited internal resources. These organisations also found it a challenge to identify funding streams and potential EU partners and were strong advocates for the proposed network to support the visibility and accessibility of opportunities and as a forum for peer support.

Legal and logistical issues were also a challenge for young migrants and other non-UK nationals. One focus group participant noted that, "For young people of other nationalities, or joint nationalities, they are being denied visas to the EU and there's no support."

"Show role models to help promote, including those who have had those challenges. To show that working parents for example and people who thought they'd never be able to do it – get young people in the mindset that maybe I could go"

Widespread support for Erasmus+

We talked to many young people and organisations currently involved in work to strengthen youth learning mobility across the UK and EU, many of whom are actively advocating for the UK to rejoin Erasmus+.

The Young European Movement has already gained significant support for its 'Embrace Erasmus+' campaign, with more than 55,000 signatories and the endorsement of leading politicians from across the UK.

The UK-EU Domestic Advisory Group, a group of civil society organisations tasked with advising the EU Commission on the implementation of the post-Brexit agreements, recommended that both sides, "consider prioritising an agreement on youth mobility to allow young people greater opportunities to study and work in the EU and UK. Moreover, the DAGs would welcome further discussions on association to Erasmus+" (UK-EU Domestic Advisory Groups Recommendations, 2024)

The European Economic and Social Committee, in their report on EU-UK youth-engagement, "urges the EC to strengthen negotiations with the UK for the full reintegration of the UK into Erasmus+" (EESC, 2024)

This recommendation is also officially backed by the European Youth Forum and the British Youth Council, having been voted on by their members, as well as by many other youth CSOs across the UK and the EU.

The European Students Union has made the same recommendation. Their release states, "There is significant strength of feeling, both from students, universities, colleges and politicians... that the UK's participation in Erasmus+ was hugely mutually beneficial. The European Students' Union (ESU) therefore calls on the UK Government and the European Commission to reopen negotiations regarding Erasmus+ and to work constructively to reinstate the UK as a full member of the programme." (ESU, 2023)

Many respondents shared that rejoining the programme would be a very popular and relatively easy option to strengthen UK-EU youth relations, and those with experience of Erasmus+ described the possibility of the UK starting as a partner country and becoming a full member in the next programme cycle.

"Rejoining Erasmus+ is a relatively low-stakes move for the British government, especially when considering the substantial benefits it offers in terms of education, personal development, and international collaboration. (Young European Movement)

The point has also been made that leaving Erasmus Plus wasn't part of the Brexit agreement. "In fact, Boris Johnson even promised that we'd stay in the programme when he was Prime Minister. So this was a choice, not a Brexit consequence". (Centre for International Leadership and Learning)

"Mobility remains very important, not only to Germany but to all 27 as a component of a new Brexit settlement." he said. "That would include a youth mobility scheme. It would include the Erasmus program, school trips, youth exchanges, the question of visa costs, which are more than 10 times higher to come to the U.K. than the other way around."" (Miguel Berger Germany's ambassador to the UK, quoted in Politico.eu)

Ultimately, it was felt that renewing the UK's involvement in Erasmus+ would make the single biggest contribution to young people's lives, to youth organisations in the UK and to UK-EU relations. Erasmus+ and facilitating greater learning mobility also featured in the conversations

related to all the other themes and would clearly make a significant impact on all of the youth recommendations.

"Erasmus+ has a well-established track record of providing significant benefits to young people and youth organisations across Europe, including the UK. It is a robust, well-funded programme with extensive networks and infrastructure that any alternative would struggle to match. (Young European Movement)

"It should know that implementing it would offer a beacon of light at a time of darkness for many young people in the UK." (Beth Riding, Young Journalist, Guardian, Aug 2024)

Northern Ireland

"In regard to the recommendation on young people linking back in with Erasmus type opportunities (and actually in terms of policy change recommendation too) the EU programmes or funding opportunities when applied to Northern Ireland are still very rooted in work between the two main communities here. Stats, funding applications, participant percentages and associated monitoring in new projects required specific percentages along Unionist / Nationalist // Protestant / Catholic lines, ignoring the new and emerging 3rd community in Northern Ireland, i.e. those who don't identify as 'Orange or Green' but have an identity outside of those traditional markers. Many of whom arrive to Northern Ireland as refugees or through other immigration pathways"

"Based on the young people we work with, and young people I've worked with in the past, this is a very very important issue. Young people at the moment in Northern Ireland aren't getting access to the same opportunities their parents had. If we could reconnect young people with those opportunities, it would be very very important"

Wales

There is valuable learning from Taith for future programmes and for National Agencies. Participants from Wales shared the relative simplicity of the process and the commitment to accessibility of the Taith programme.

"I heard that Erasmus has a lot to learn from Taith, especially giving young people who wouldn't have had the opportunity the chance to travel. It's opened up opportunities to travel for those who are homeless, autistic, etc, who would never have had the opportunity otherwise."

Scotland

"A lot of research and work on different child protection areas comes from cross-border coming together. For example, in Scotland we were part of Drawing Together, with Finland, Norway – about how refugees build their lives in new places. When connections like this are made and strengthened, it can lead to more research opportunities, which then broadens the scope and makes the research more relevant."

Recommendation 2: Cultural exchange and understanding

Strengthen opportunities for cultural exchange and mutual understanding between young people in the UK and the EU

In addition to supported learning mobility, we recommend that the UK and the EU:

- 1. Support wider opportunities for cultural exchange between young people in the UK and the EU. This includes support for organisations and initiatives to provide accessible opportunities for young people to connect, build mutual understanding, dialogue on issues of concern and develop lasting relationships.
- 2. **Strengthen global and European citizenship education**, so it reflects the diverse identities and experiences of young people and enables more opportunities for young people to gain intercultural skills in formal and non-formal education and youth work.
- 3. **Tackle division, misinformation, and disinformation**. Actively explore ways to address the spread of divisive and harmful narratives and support responsive and tailored support for young people's digital and media literacy skills development.

Good relationships between young people within and between the UK and EU were seen as a foundation for meaningful and inclusive collaboration, political engagement and being 'stronger together'. However, throughout the consultation there was an undercurrent of concern that this foundation was being undermined; that relationships were being damaged – between young people in the UK and between the UK and the EU – and that the skills, attitudes and opportunities needed to connect were being lost too.

Young people want opportunities to broaden their horizons and networks, and many want to explore their own heritage and their shared European cultures, values, and backgrounds. There is a desire to rekindle a collective mindset and the feeling of being part of something bigger – not as part of the EU, but with a common purpose and values.

"It's a vicious cycle. The less opportunity, the less we explore and see the benefits of learning about other cultures and meeting other people"

Challenges of division

The issue of racism, xenophobia and homophobia in the UK was mentioned in different ways by most of the groups we talked to, which was perceived to have worsened following Brexit. Young people talked about the need to facilitate good conversations, to see positive coverage of different identities in the media, and to address missing public narratives, and ensure that everyone's right to be heard is upheld. As one participant out it, "*Tackling racism is a European thing.*"

"I have personal connections through family heritage, so feel loss. And I hear horrible things about immigrants. Brexit lit a fire under this. It's bought out the nasty side in people."

There was also concern that Brexit has led to nationalism in the UK and a distancing with the UK's nearest neighbours, as well as issues in how young people in the UK view Europe and the

world. Some people described an identity crisis and the need for British young people to explore their wider identities, including as European citizens. The issue of identity and loyalties was keenly felt in Northern Ireland where the impacts of Brexit were more present and where strong solidarity had been shown from other EU countries.

The groups felt that Brexit had also had a negative impact on rights and freedoms in the UK, and has contributed to closing the space for dialogue, with people feeling less able to share opinions, particularly online. Exacerbating this is the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation. Young people experience this in their digital lives and see it fueling divisions and hardening positions.

In a recent report, the World Economic Forum designated misinformation and disinformation as the number one most severe global risk over the next two years (*Global Risks Perception Survey 2024-25*)

"A lot of young people don't have access to that education. We are still part of Europe, we are united, there's just so much division out there. It's important to educate young people on it. We need to sit down and talk about this. There's so much misinformation."

Education was currently not seen to be responding adequately to these issues and there was a feeling that there has been a narrowing in both education content and approaches. School trips to Europe and language learning opportunities were mentioned, and the issue of there being less history content around Europe as well as the UK's colonial past. On the whole, the European and global dimension needs to be strengthened and delivered in ways that our engaging and reflect the current context.

"There's need to give young people an accurate view of history and culture, including about out historic and strong ties with Europe."

"I don't think the efforts on education have been that effective. Feels like European institutions haven't really thought about it, and the materials feel really old. They are maybe behind on education strategies and something they need to be more proactive on."

Hopes for unity

There was a strong feeling that the youth sector has a role in bringing people together and challenging the rise of populist, divisive and harmful narratives. Many organisations talked about how they aim to bring a sense of unity and help broaden young people's horizons and connect across cultures.

"We can tangibly do something by connecting people and need to show young people we are making a difference on these issues."

Participants highlighted that young people are still not connected enough overall. While events such as The EU Youth Gathering are important, more on the ground outreach and dedicated work was needed to reach those who are not currently involved.

"It feels like a really important time for young people to experience differences. Division, the rise of populism, etc. It just feels like reaching out to each other is more important than ever. This recommendation is really close to our hearts at the moment."

A key message was that education and information must be co-priorities with the other recommendations, and that all sectors can play a role in creating space for positive exchange.

There was stressed that the youth sector is well placed to support the crucial interpersonal, intercultural, and wider life skills, such as critical thinking and media literacy, for all young people to engage confidently and positively with each other and across difference. However, significantly more resources are needed to create effective spaces and opportunities.

"Those things come naturally when you're in the same space together. We have those conversations across language barriers, etc really complex and even uncomfortable ones about citizenship, privilege... and those things naturally came out just by being in the same space together."

"With the ESC. I thought, wow! Why don't we have that in the UK. Funded opportunities to volunteer in your own country or abroad. Not just meet other people but understand yourself at that pivotal time in your life. The opportunity feels vast and feels bleak if we don't have access to it."

"It seems really obvious, but it's financial. At the end of the day, to have the ability to offer your time. Time is a privilege. What we recognise at Student Action for Refugees is that young people don't have free time as much anymore. They have to work, alongside education."

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"It was interesting to see a consensus amongst participants who thought that there is not enough signposting towards opportunities for young people to network and speak about issues relating to strengthening Scotland – EU relations.

Despite some participants being as young as 18, they seemed acutely aware of the opportunities that have been lost with Europe and they have a real enthusiasm to find ways for greater collaboration."

"Currently, there's a big wave of international nurses working on wards that are short-staffed, and there's been issues of racism within nursing... and there's a lot of misinformation as well. 100% there needs to be more education about different cultures. We need to facilitate how to engage with different people. We also deal with people from all different backgrounds and it helps with patient health."

Peace Plus was frequently cited as a value of the EU to young people. The programme is designed to support peace and prosperity across Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland. It notes that, "The well-being of young people is essential for long-term peace and prosperity in the region. The programme will therefore pay special attention to their needs and potential through an ambitious youth programme and shared learning."

In reference to Peace Plus, a member of the EESC stressed the importance of "re-establishing and nurturing educational, cultural and social exchanges between young Europeans in the EU and the UK, who will no doubt be the architects of our common future."

There were specific needs expressed relating to **the border in North Ireland**, including the need to maintain free movement and communications between EU and Irish groups, as well as the need to maintain the feasibility of European students attending Northern Irish universities.

"I work with a young person from Syria, with leave to remain, and linked him in with opportunities in his local area, and those opportunities led to work with young people in the South. But he was unable to take part, without having to go through a lot of hoops and expense, which I felt was unfair. He was unable to take up opportunities that other people living here could – just 30 miles away across the border." Would need an agreement between the British and Irish governments about those who are resident in both the jurisdictions on freedom of movement".

"This recommendation particularly resonates with me because the last year I was part if the first student led think tank in Edinburgh. We make policy proposals to the council about issues affecting us in the city. We've covered homelessness, environmentalism, sexism. Having international students on our team helped with creating innovative solutions and learning from systems that have been implemented across Europe. More engagement between EU and Scotland and the UK mean we can create more innovative solutions overall".

"Doing things like this can be seen as a bit of luxury. But we try to bring a global perspective to all our work, and we share this so other organisations can bring an international element.

"Its about being global, about being international. As a nation we have it in our DNA and in our work, but unfortunately because of the cuts we don't have the funding to make it as central as we'd like it to be."

The Curriculum for Wales was shared as an example of how these issues can be made central to education. One of the four purposes of the curriculum is to support, "ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world... who are knowledgeable about their culture, community, society and the world, now and in the past, and respect the needs and rights of others, as a member of a diverse society."

It introduces learners to, "less familiar contexts, **broadening their horizons**, **engaging with perspectives different** from their own and appreciating wider challenges and issues. These contexts also help them make sense of their relationship with their communities, their national identity and the wider world."

Recommendation 3: Youth participation

Strengthen youth participation in dialogue and policy on the future of UK-EU relations

- 1. Develop mechanisms for young people's participation in dialogue and policy making on the future of UK-EU relations to ensure that young people's views and considerations can be meaningfully considered in all areas. These mechanisms should be inclusive, considering the diverse needs of young people across backgrounds and identities. Such mechanisms might include:
 - Development of a UK-EU Youth Sounding Board to advise on youth priorities for UK-EU relations.
 - Continued UK youth sector representation on the UK Domestic Advisory Groups
 - Engagement with existing structures for youth participation such as the UK Youth Parliament, and local youth councils, as well as independent civil society and youth voice from all UK nations.
- 2. Enable young people and youth organisations from the UK to access existing structures and spaces for dialogue, including the EU Youth Dialogues and European Youth Events.
- 3. Carry out a review of the UK and devolved government approaches to youth policy and political participation, including the current opportunities, institutions and funding structures, and the wider public context that may enable or inhibit young people's voice, participation, and civic rights. This review should prioritize addressing barriers faced by marginalized youth and acknowledge the different needs across the population.

Young people felt unheard through the Brexit debates ("It wasn't our choice!") and feel disenfranchised from the negotiations following the UK's withdrawal. However, many younger people do not feel connected at all to debates around Brexit. They feel it is in the past and want to focus on their needs and the needs of the country in the current reality. For both older and younger young people, and for representatives of youth organisations, it was important to feel that we are moving on from the divisive debates and moving towards a more positive future, with goodwill on all sides.

What was clear is that supporting all young people to understand the current situation and future possibilities will be an important part of ensuring inclusive, informed participation, through engaging experiences, peer-to-peer exchange, education and awareness raising. (Supported by Recommendation 3)

For many, this recommendation was described as a bridge building exercise. There was said to be a need to create dialogue around the topic - with young people, within civil society and with decision-makers. It was said that the UK has not yet come to terms with the future of their relations and people were "stuck on mourning Brexit". Misconceptions and frustrations around the topic need to be more calmly addressed, as it had become such a partisan issue. Some participants described how discussion around Brexit in the UK has disappeared or stagnated and some young people expressed confusion about why UK youth would be still engaged in EU youth political structures and programmes.

"I'm 16, I don't really know what Brexit was. I just know that we left the EU. Younger people won't connect with things if it's framed about Brexit or post-Brexit"

"What we're hearing from young people is 'why would we bother?'. The world has moved on. There's another way into that conversation that stops the Brexit mentality kicking in."

"Accessibility wise, there's an information gap about what this would actually mean. If you want to involve young people, they need to know what it means to influence policy and whether it would have any kind of impact."

"You don't know what you don't know. And that probably summarises a lot of young people's experience of the EU."

It was said there was a need for young people from different backgrounds and with different perspectives to meet and talk about issues such as UK-EU mobility or how young people can be closer to Europe in the current situation. Many felt it was important to have forums for young people to lead the conversations and develop ways to support continuous dialogue on youth issues, on cultural understanding and on common concerns such as trade, security, and human rights.

Frequently stressed was that outreach cannot afford to be closed off and limited to those already with access to greater education and opportunities. It was said to be important to target populations who are not in university or connected to youth organisations, "non-joiners", and minority and marginalised groups, and provide opportunities for representation and participation.

It was said that avenues to engage young people within the EU must give young people a collective voice, give them responsibility, and influence no matter their level of political experience.

"These are the spaces deciding the future direction. They should be transparent. I've never heard of some of these things, like the DAG! Maybe some sort of information resource for young people and groups to use. Who these groups are, here's what they do, here's how you can contact them. Map them out regionally and nationally."

Young people told us about specific themes about which they would like to engage in EU-UK policy dialogue. The number one issue was Climate Change and sustainability, particularly the pursuit of net-zero, specific environmental issues, for example, fracking; and addressing post-Brexit environmental regulations. Young environmentalists shared their concerns that the EU's role is being watered down and that there's less funding available.

Participants also expressed a desire for greater collaboration on EU specific programmes, focusing on cooperation and interconnectivity. This included collaborations like Horizon; university home fees for EU students and better trade agreements with the EU, for example, "to reduce shortages in food and pharmacy supply issues."

Trade Union representatives were keen for collaboration between UK and EU trade unions, in order to recognise that all workers are going through the same transformations regardless we are in the UK/EU and to strengthen and share information between young members.

There was some positivity about this recommendation and faith in the UK and EU institutions to continue their support of young people's rights and engagement in democracy. The proposed network detailed in Recommendation 4 would also support this.

Northern Ireland

"One thing that's different about Northern Ireland, people born here can get an Irish passport. So, opens up the possibility to join EU processes and access opportunities, but do we have the structures to support this. So, it's perhaps a different question to other parts of the UK."

"Those young people who identify as Irish nationality, how can they link in with EU structures?"

Scotland

"In Scotland, we've just incorporated the UN Rights of the Child into domestic framework, which means we have a moment to make the Government legally accountable for young people's participation and civic rights, and also the right to have information. This stops at 18, so we're looking now at giving those same rights to young people through ISESCA. Pushing that with the Scottish Government would be a great opportunity, but using what we do have, under article 12, to empower young people, through digital education, through comparison with other states that have implemented this across the world. All very well having these on paper but there's a huge implementation gap and real practice on the ground."

Recommendation 4: An UK-EU network of youth organisations

Support a UK-EU network of youth organisations for ongoing dialogue and collaboration

- 1. Provide support and funding for a UK-EU network of youth organisations and youth representatives, ensuring diverse representation. Key roles of this network would include:
 - Facilitating learning and exchange between youth organisations and young people.
 - Addressing the barriers that some young people face in accessing learning mobility and resources.
 - Providing a collective voice on UK-EU youth relations, learning mobility and opportunities.
 - Identifying, sourcing and signposting to resources and funding opportunities.

From the beginning of the consultation, there was widespread support for continuous dialogue between youth in the UK and the EU. It was recognised that there are limited opportunities for UK / European collaboration and collective voice and action; and in the UK, there is very little funding and support for European engagement.

There are currently many networks, organisations and groups in the UK, and based in the EU with UK members, whose aims align with the recommendations in this report. However, they are not connected and not maximising the potential to generate, for example, learning and insights, partnership opportunities, or accessible pathways for different groups of young people.

Embedding diversity and ensuring accessibility from the inception of the network was seen as crucial. This included outreach to organisations who work with different groups of young people and reducing barriers to entry.

"And through smaller organisations and local youth groups, to outreach to young people in rural areas and small communities. Can help bridge the gap. And connect local groups to other local groups in EU. Look at what already exists."

"Let's try and meet young people, particularly in rural Scotland, where they are with what they need. Part of that is strengthening local communities, and that enables wider engagement."

Learning and exchange between youth organisations

There was a clear desire to find spaces for ongoing dialogue between youth organisations, including about the post-Brexit future itself, and to explore possibilities together.

There was a spread of opinion about the relative value of the exchange itself – through which opportunities may emerge – and the provision of specific opportunities, e.g. skills training or thematic group working. On all counts, participants supported the idea of a network that enabled new relationships, facilitated regular conversations and collective learning, seeded collaboration and that could pool information and resources.

Participants also noted that positive, existing organisational relationships provide a strong foundation for the future and to continue the dialogue and that some networks already exist.

There was a question about how this network might serve the existing ecosystem and how it might be a "network of networks."

"There are lots of EU-UK friendships that can develop into GREAT opportunities for future projects and networks!"

"It's good to use pre-existing platforms and networks to share things."

Learning and exchange for young people

Many participants promoted the idea of the network directly engaging young people, around three specific areas.

- Providing a forum for intercultural and international dialogue. There was concern at the growing isolation of young people in the UK from Europe (and globally) and the lack of opportunities for meaningful exchange.
- A forum for practical exchange of ideas and practice, with the aim of supporting shared learning and action-oriented relationships. Also mentioned was the possibility of mentoring relationships, both peer-to-peer and between young people and organisations or experts.
- A space for young people to easily find and access (free) courses and other relevant skillsbuilding and other opportunities. These may also be delivered directly by network members.

An information hub and resourcing youth initiatives

There is a clear need and desire for support for EU / UK youth initiatives, especially after the closure of Erasmus+. It was felt that the network could play a key role in leveraging, sourcing or drawing together resources, if not directly providing funding.

In the first instance, it was suggested that the network could pool and share existing opportunities and important information. Some initiatives participants shared as examples they are involved in or are familiar with included Europeers UK and InterCom, run by the Centre for International Leadership and Learning (CILL); E-twining initiatives, national platforms, for example the Young Scot platform; informal social enterprises that facilitate cultural exchanges, for example, Gotoco; and young professional networks.

Other politically oriented forums mentioned that are of interest to the network include the Council of Europe Advisory Council on Youth, the European Youth Work Agenda (EU and CoE) and the Bonn Process of implementation, European Youth Parliament, International Youth Policy Dialogue Network and the OSCE Youth Forum.

It was advocated by many that the network should focus on supporting inclusion in EU-UK youth opportunities and push for greater access to funding for small and minority organisations as well as funding to widen participation. Support to the network for overcoming other barriers to mobility was also discussed, for example, "Working with partners on entry requirements and the visa system."

"Especially for young people who are not EU or UK citizens, it's really difficult to know about initiatives and what is possible with visas and travel."

Policy and Advocacy

The potential for a stronger, collective voice and influence was a priority for some. This included:

- Creating a forum for policy dialogue amongst organisations, to which decision-makers could be invited.
- Developing specific policy recommendations, in response to changing needs and context, and opportunities for shared advocacy.
- An opportunity to "unify policy" to seek alignment in policies and procedures to make EU/UK collaboration easier, for example about safeguarding.

It was believed that the network could be a relatively straightforward and low-cost approach to supporting all the recommendations. It might require a small investment to incubate and to provide a coordination role but would draw on the energy and existing work of its members. It is responding to demand, and through carrying out this research some foundations are already in place, as it connected with and between organisations, young people and groups as part of the process.

"This recommendation stood out the most for me. This is something that the young people we work with will find really really valuable."

"Awareness and network opportunities need to be strengthened. It doesn't feel like things are being shared with everyone. People are also doing the same things - need more joined up working, realising we all have the same aim. At the end of the day, it's about getting young people the information. That's why we're all in this role."



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The Erasmus Programme, UK Parliamentary Briefing

This briefing provides information on the UK's involvement in the Erasmus+ programme. https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8326/

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Contributors to the consultation

The organisations listed below are those that signed up for focus groups and interviews.

Alliance Scotland	Include Youth	Space Era Germany
AMICS/ AC Amics de la Biblioteca	Y4IE- Youth for Inclusive	Streetbeat Youth Project
de la Fonteta	Europe	
Barnardo's Scotland	International English Library	Student Action for Refugees
Boys' and Girls' Clubs of Wales	Internet Society	Tenth Stoa
British Youth Council	Inverclyde youth work services	The African Parent
Camphill Community Glengraig	JEF Europe	The Office for the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales
Centre for International Leadership	King's College London	The Scout Association / Scouts
and Learning (CILL)	European Society	Cymru
Citizens' Rights Project Scotland	Lead The Way Youth Summit	the3million
CoE Advisory Council of Youth	Live Love Paris	UK Youth Parliament
Connect Futures	Londonderry YMCA	Ulster Wildlife
Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA)	London School of Economics	UNESCO UK Youth Envoy
Council for Wales Voluntary Youth Services (CWVYS)	Ludek, Polish Community Group	UNESCO Youth Forum
Creative Learning Programmes UK	Mighty Creatives	Urdd Gobaith Cymru
EA Youth Service	National Youth Agency	Volunteer Now Youth Advisory Partnership
Edinburgh University	Northern Ireland Youth Forum	Warwick Volunteers
Education and Learning Institute Greece	National Youth Advocacy Service Cymru (NYAS)	Welsh Centre for International Affairs
European Students Union	Ocean Youth Trust Scotland	YMCA
European Youth Parliament UK	Partnership for Young London	Young European Movement UK
Ethnic Minority and Youth Support, Wales	Perth and Kinross Local Council	Young Greens
European Education and Learning Institute Greece	Politics in Action	Young Scot
Girlguiding	Princes Trust	Youth Action Northern Ireland
Glasgow University	Scottish Advisory Forum on Europe	Youth Advisory Partnership, Northern Ireland
Global Vision Initiative	Scottish Government	Youth and Environment Europe
Goldsmiths University	Scottish Youth Parliament	Youth Climate Ambassadors
Greater Manchester Youth Combined Authorities	Service Civil International (SCI)	Youth Community Support Agency
Human Rights Consortium Scotland	Social Enterprise Academy	Youth Local Action Groups, Scotland
I Will	South Belfast Alternatives	YouthLink Scotland





