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Rights & Representation: **What Young Europeans in London know and think about their rights and politics in the UK**

Citizens from other European countries tend to arrive in the UK when young, usually for work or study. EU, EEA and Swiss citizens already living in the UK, and their non-EU family members, have to apply to the EU Settlement Scheme by 30 June 2021 if they wish to stay in the UK. While the debate on immigration is overwhelmingly concerned with numbers, there is very little research on Europeans' personal experiences with the UK immigration system and their wider concerns regarding Brexit.

This Citizens' Led Engagement Programme, funded by the Greater London Authority (GLA) and managed by the3million, focuses on young Europeans living in London. It asks two main research questions:

1. What are young Europeans' concerns regarding their rights in the UK? (with a detailed discussion about the EU Settlement Scheme and access to British citizenship)
2. How can young Europeans become more engaged in their communities and have a voice in policymaking?

Key points

- Young Europeans were mainly concerned about the economic impacts of Brexit and thought about their rights in the UK mostly as workers' rights.
- Young Europeans accessed information about their rights in the UK predominantly through media & social media and overall did not consider themselves well informed about their rights.
- Young Europeans generally felt unrepresented or underrepresented in politics and policymaking, both as young people and as migrants.
- There is a need for more accessible and equal access to information at the local level and a wider strategy on how to engage with a highly mobile group of young Europeans.

Peer research

The Young Europeans Citizens' Led Engagement Programme ran between March 2019 and March 2020. This is a research project about young Europeans, conducted by young Europeans themselves. From design to dissemination, the research was co-created and facilitated by a team of 12 young European peer researchers, one young European filmmaker and managed by the Chair of Young Europeans at the3million. The young Europeans team conducted, translated and transcribed 20 audio-recorded focus groups, each between 1-1.5 hours long, taking place between June and September 2019. This research was further informed by interviews with local councillors from London boroughs with large European communities and discussions with other key stakeholders from the youth & migration sector.

Focus groups

- 20 focus groups with young Europeans, age range 17-30, with a mean age of 25;
- 11 nationality groups who have less involvement with City Hall: Danish, Romanian, Belgian, Hungarian, Bulgarian, Dutch, Greek, Latvian, Slovak (EU), Swiss (non-EEA, but same citizens' rights as EEA nationals in the UK) and Albanian (non-EU/EEA);
- Focus on young Europeans in pre-university education, in lower paid work and those with caring responsibilities;
- Participants have lived in the UK from two weeks to 21 years, with a mean of 6 years.

Main findings

There is an underlying assumption that young Europeans in London are ‘easy to reach’ as a group. They tend to be digitally literate, speak good English, work or study (or both) and follow media and social media. This qualitative research shows the wide variety of experiences of people with similar core demographic characteristics. Although this qualitative research is not generalisable, its nuanced findings call for a more comprehensive understanding of young Europeans’ experiences in the UK. The research uncovers some concerning aspects regarding awareness on citizens’ rights and political engagement that should be studied in more detail in larger-scale research in the future.

EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS)

- Participants’ experiences range from successfully applying to the EUSS to hearing about the EUSS for the first time during the focus groups.
- At the time of the research, the majority of eligible participants had not applied to the EUSS.
- The vast majority were aware of the EUSS, but several commented that they will apply when they will be more certain about the impact of Brexit or their own future plans.
- There was some confusion regarding the requirements of the EUSS and the rights of those with pre-settled, as compared to settled status. Some conflated ‘settled status’ with ‘citizenship’ or with ‘permanent residence’ under EEA rules.
- Those who already applied to the EUSS found it straightforward, with the exception of a few having issues scanning their ID documents (and having to post the physical ID document to the Home Office) or having to provide additional evidence despite studying and/or working for 5 continuous years in the UK.

Access to British citizenship

- Most participants would consider naturalisation as British citizens at some point in the future, with a few already making plans to apply.
- As in the case of the EUSS, there is low awareness, confusion and conflation of the requirements for this process and the rights attached to citizenship.
- Every participant who considers citizenship does so for pragmatic reasons. These range from having more security over their existing rights (coupled with low trust in the EUSS in some cases), being granted additional rights (e.g. full voting rights) or gaining financial advantages in their future.
- The main barriers to applying for citizenship are the high application fee and the fact some European countries do not allow or have restrictions on dual nationality for their citizens.
- Participants’ concerns about the citizenship process reflect their wish to protect their freedom of movement rights. The participants who consider applying for citizenship do so on the assumption they will be able to hold dual citizenship and therefore, their EU passport, which preserves their freedom of movement. Conversely, those who assume they cannot hold dual citizenship state this as the main (and usually only) reason for not considering naturalising as British.

Political engagement

- The vast majority of participants do not feel young Europeans’ voices are represented in the UK.
- Participants feel unrepresented both as young people and as migrants, two identities which intersect.
- There are mixed views on whether young non-British Europeans’ voices should be officially represented: while some believe that the right of political representation should be linked to residency, others associate it with citizenship.

- The vast majority are not involved in UK politics. Although many amongst those who have the right to vote in local elections are registered, the majority do not vote. Some were unaware they have local election voting rights.
- Most participants are unaware of the role of local government and think that local elections are not important, compared to the national elections in which they cannot participate. Several participants feel excluded from decisions affecting them directly, such as UK general elections and referendums, and they mention how they would vote in national elections if they had this right.
- Participants tend to differentiate between 'traditional' ways to involve in politics, such as voting in elections, and less 'traditional' ways, such as signing petitions or discussing politics on social media, which are more engaging for them.
- There is a sense amongst participants that engagement is low because migrant communities are not well organised and there are very few or no community leaders of whom they are aware.
- The lack of or low engagement in politics is explained by participants in reference to their socio-economic situations. They usually mention having insufficient free time when working long hours and limited possibilities to engage locally when living in short-term rented accommodation and frequently changing address.
- Access to information is unequal and depends on which borough participants live in and whether they have other opportunities to get information, such as through schools or employers.

Policy recommendations

All focus group participants were asked about what could be done for young Europeans to be more informed about their rights in the UK and more engaged in politics and their local communities. This summary of policy recommendations is based on the focus group analysis. It responds to some specific concerns raised by participants regarding the EUSS, access to British citizenship and political engagement.

EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS)

- It is concerning that some participants did not know about the EUSS or thought they did not have to apply for status. It is clear that more outreach is needed, even for the groups that are assumed to be easily reachable. The Government must ensure that sufficient funding will be provided to civil society organisations and local authorities to inform EU, EEA & Swiss citizens and their non-EU family members about the EUSS and provide support to those needing it.
- The findings show unequal access to information that depends on the participants' demographics, existing community links and also on where they live in London. There needs to be more consistent and equal support at the local level in London.
- Many participants are concerned about checks on their right to work or checks at the border, with some commenting on the lack of physical proof of status. Physical proof of pre-settled and settled status would restore some trust in the system and reduce potential discrimination in the future.

Access to British citizenship

- The application fee is the main barrier for participants who want to naturalise as British citizens. The cost of citizenship needs to be revisited and be more aligned with what it actually costs to process and include more flexible methods of payment.
- The second most important barrier for some young Europeans who want to apply for British citizenship is the inability to hold dual citizenship or the strict restrictions on dual citizenship in some European countries. There should be discussions at the European level on how to have easier access to dual citizenship, particularly for those who made the UK their home before Brexit who find themselves in an unprecedented situation.
- There is a need for more information on the rights attached to British citizenship. It is concerning that British citizenship is often conflated with settled status by some participants.

Political engagement

- It is crucial to have more awareness of voting rights amongst young Europeans. Especially in the post-Brexit context, it is important to preserve local election voting rights for EU citizens and inform EU citizens about those rights.
- Many participants feel that national-level elections are more important than local-level elections and that they would be involved if they could vote in national elections and referendums. There is a need for more research on how linking voting rights to residency rather than citizenship could enable engagement and social integration for migrants.
- There is very little awareness of the role of local government, hence many participants are sceptical that their vote or involvement would make any impact at the local level. There should be more efforts to inform communities about the influence and impact of local government decision-making on everyday life.
- Young Europeans are more likely to get involved when they see people like them in politics. Most feel underrepresented or unrepresented. There should be a review on the representation of European communities in local government and engagement on how migrant communities can inform local government about their issues more effectively.
- Many young Europeans are highly mobile, both internationally and internally within the UK. There should be serious engagement on how to best work with this group of people at the local level, given that their 'local communities' change frequently.
- Most participants do not engage in politics as they lack the time and resources. This raises questions about the accessibility of some forms of political involvement for people in less privileged socio-economic circumstances.

Anaïs (peer researcher, Swiss and Belgian focus groups):

The most surprising was that in groups that were having the same characteristics of people, some were very informed, some were not informed. And they were coming from the same background, so sometimes you were trying to understand why they would receive that information that other people are not receiving?

Alina (participant, Romanian focus group):

I haven't heard anyone that will stand up for our Romanian community. Probably we would have all known that if there is someone getting involved and standing up and speaking for us, then we would have surely known and probably would have been more involved if we would have had that person, we would have known more [...] They need to send, I think, other Romanian people to just make them aware and explain the situation – maybe gatherings, I don't know, anything.

Dr Rohit Dasgupta (Councillor, London Borough of Newham):

We have a very big Eastern European population within Newham, but none of them is represented within the council and I think that is not good enough. When you don't see people who look like you, talk like you, who are part of your community, represented in elected positions, you will not want to feel like you belong over there. I think there is a need for any party to make sure that our elected representatives look like the area that they represent.

David (peer researcher, Dutch focus groups):

One of the things that surprised me, which I tried to not look surprised at, is that one of the people today [September 2019] didn't know about the Settlement Scheme. And it's been out there for many, many months. So, this highlights how there is a problem with information reach and it's going to be very important to solve that.

Kostantina (participant, Greek focus group):

It is all general, everyone gets involved in discussions but there is no actual discussion about the rights. And if we ask English people, I am not 100% sure they are actually aware of their rights in their own country. Invite people to open discussions and to different communities, sometimes they organise events and stuff so they can actually invite people, the community to go there.

Rabina Khan (Councillor, London Borough of Tower Hamlets):

I think politicians, lawmakers, people in public life, and myself, have failed collectively to listen to the voices of young people, their concerns, their aspirations. And if we take that moment and that time to listen to them, I believe we can build a much bigger, broader, positive and stronger generation of young people going forward to build our nation to be an example of what every nation wants to be on the global platform.



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This briefing paper is a summary of the research findings. For an electronic copy of the full report, please email Alexandra: alexandra.bulat@the3million.org.uk