

Focus Group Summary

Changes to freedom of movement after Brexit – the implications for Wales

October 2019

Background

This report summarises the findings of focus groups held as part of the External Affairs and Additional Legislation Committee's work on changes to freedom of movement after Brexit. The focus group was held in Cardiff on 30 September 2019 and involved EU citizens¹ directly affected by potential changes to freedom of movement rules after Brexit, and individuals who work for organisations and charities that represent them.

The session was organised by the Assembly's Citizen Engagement team through partner organisations, and through stakeholders who had engaged with the online forum discussions on the platform, Loomio, over the summer.

The focus groups were attended and facilitated by David Rees and Mandy Jones; Alun Davies and Delyth Jewell.

¹NB: that any reference to EU citizens in this document means EU citizens living in Wales, and the UK, from other European Union and European Economic Area countries.



1. Summary of findings

1.1. The EU Settlement Scheme

General

- 1.** There were powerful and emotive personal testimonies regarding the EU Settlement Scheme shared during the focus group sessions.
- 2.** Many participants spoke of a sense that they were no longer welcome in the UK following the EU referendum, and that the policy pursued by the UK Government since the referendum has exacerbated this.
- 3.** A number of participants noted that some of the rhetoric relating to the issue of EU migration had hardened and described the toll that this had had on their emotional wellbeing, and that of friends and/or family members.
- 4.** One participant emphasised that it is not simply an administrative process, but that real people are involved and that it was important to remember how the process affects them. The participant went on to say that: “The act of having to apply for a status that downgrades one’s rights feels debilitating. No wonder there are no queues to do it”.
- 5.** Nearly all participants noted the low level of registration for the EU Settlement Scheme in Wales. Referring to the impact the Scheme was having on people on the ground, one participant commented that “policies are drafted for ideal scenarios, but lives are not ideal”.

Welsh Government support

- 6.** It was noted by those working for the third sector that the level of support by the Welsh Government, both in terms of financial support and the coordinating role being delivered by officials, was high.
- 7.** Some participants at the focus group had accessed Welsh Government funding via the EU Transition Fund, and others had bid for funding directly from the Home Office.
- 8.** A range of different groups were being supported by the charities present, including vulnerable groups such as people with poor mental wellbeing, the digitally excluded, those struggling with language barriers, and harder to reach communities such as the Roma community in Wales.

9. Most participants representing the third sector stated that although their work was often targeted to particular sections or areas of need, their work does mean that they provide help and support to all EU citizens who seek help, or point them to where they can find help and advice.

Communication and messaging

10. On the issue of communication, it was felt that there were a number of confused and, in some cases, contradictory messages coming from government, and circulating in the country at large.

11. One participant highlighted that sometimes these contradictory messages come from central government, and Minister serving in the UK Government. They highlighted recent comments by the Home Secretary relating to 'no deal' and the immediate end of freedom of movement.

12. It was noted that although the Welsh Government had improved its communications work in recent months, this work was insufficient. In particular, there was a sense from participants that the messages were not reaching individuals and families affected on the ground. The need for a communications plan, containing key messages, and to be disseminated through public services e.g. local health boards, schools and local government, was emphasised.

13. Some participants drew comparisons between the clear and unequivocal messages of support being issued by the Scottish Government to EU citizens in Scotland and the perception that the messages emanating from Welsh Government were more muted, and at the very least, not reaching the individuals and communities affected. Many felt that the Welsh Government should seek to emulate the Scottish Government's leadership in this area, and strengthen how it communicates its messages of support for EU citizens living in Wales.

Issues relating to the Scheme

14. Some participants highlighted practical difficulties relating to the operation of the scheme.

15. One area of concern was instances where members of the same family were being granted different statuses, and that this caused complications and anxiety within households.

16. Many noted the difficulties relating to the digital-only nature of the scheme. Some of those who worked with vulnerable groups, in particular, stated that the need for those individuals to create an email address in order to register for the

scheme could pose problems in years to come. It was argued that consideration could be given to providing registrants with a physical document.

17. In terms of the requirement to scan documents, it was noted that there is only one document scanning centre in the whole of Wales (in Caerphilly) and that the costs associated can be very high.

18. One participant noted that the cost of an appointment to get documents scanned as part of an application for permanent residency (which is separate to the EU Settlement Scheme) is around £200. The participant stated that “they are making it deliberately difficult for EU citizens”.

19. Other participants shared experiences where families, whose children may have been born in the UK, have had to seek appointments at Embassies or, in some instances travel to the country of their parents’ birth, in order to obtain documents (mainly passports) for family members. This has a high financial cost, and the focus groups heard that in some instances, the waiting list for appointments ranged from several weeks to up to six months.

20. Others noted that the rights that all citizens currently have, through the UK’s membership of the EU, cannot be guaranteed after Brexit. It was argued that these rights need to be enshrined in primary legislation by the UK Parliament.

Third sector funding

21. A number of participants highlighted the fact that the third sector, who are currently delivering help and support to EU citizens living in Wales (with some additional funding coming from the Welsh and UK Governments) are also reliant on EU funding. It was noted that the future landscape in terms of EU funding was highly uncertain, particularly in Wales, which receives a large amount of EU social and cohesion funds.

22. It was noted that at present, the third sector has very little certainty in terms of funding beyond 2020, and that the issues discussed in relation to EU citizens are likely to continue well into the next decade.

1. 2. Future immigration policy

23. Some participants highlighted the potential damage that had been done to the UK’s international reputation since the Brexit vote, and argued that the UK may find itself having difficulties attracting overseas talent in the future.

24. A number of participants made the case for giving EU citizens the right to vote in all elections in future. It was noted that the Senedd and Elections (Wales) Bill currently being considered by the Assembly is likely to be amended to give all citizens from elsewhere in Europe and living in Wales, the right to vote in devolved and local elections.

Salary threshold

- 25.** Most participants stated that they disagreed with the £30,000 a year salary threshold proposed by the previous UK Government in its White Paper on the future of immigration policy.²
- 26.** Some participants noted that the health and social care sector could be hit particularly hard by a £30,000 a year salary threshold.

A Brighter Future for Wales

27. With regards to the latest Welsh Government policy paper, ‘A Brighter Future for Wales’; concerns were raised about its exploration of potential additional immigration controls. In particular, concerns were expressed about any move towards removing EU nationals who fail to secure work within their first six months of residence. One participant noted that it appeared to be advocating more of the same “hostile environment policy”.

Attitudes towards immigration

- 28.** Both focus groups heard anecdotal evidence relating to instances of anti-immigrant rhetoric and bullying, particularly in school settings.
- 29.** Another participant described the way in which they now felt afraid to speak in their native language on the street.
- 30.** Some participants shared anecdotal evidence of people being denied access to services, including healthcare. It was noted that some frontline staff are not trained and have insufficient information in terms of how Brexit, and changes to freedom of movement rules, relate to access to services.
- 31.** A number of participants felt that employers could play more of a role in sending messages of support to EU nationals within their workforces.

² Since publication of the White Paper, the new government under the premiership of Boris Johnson MP has asked the Migration Advisory Committee to look again at the proposals for future immigration policy. This review is still underway.
