

# Brexit built borders inside British-European families, new report found

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From joining different queues at airport security to holding different immigration status in their country of residence, the shift from a common status as EU citizens to family members having different rights

to residence has evoked strong emotions.

Brexit has had 'real life consequences' for those in mixed British-European families, says new research co-led by Lancaster University and the University of Birmingham.

The study "British-European families after Brexit," completed as part of the ESRC-funded project "Rebordering Britain and Britons after Brexit," highlights how Brexit has introduced different rights and conditions concerning residence between spouses and partners, children and parents.

Many families worry about how these differences in status will impact on their future movements between the UK and EU.

Since the end of the Brexit transition period, moving from the UK to the EU has become more complex for such families. As British [family members](#) no longer have the right to freedom of movement, in the absence of work, their right to move and settle in the EU may be dependent on that of their EU [family](#) member(s).

Until recently, the 'Surinder Singh' route permitted foreign nationals to enter and settle in the UK on the basis that they were family members of a British citizen and living with them in an EU or EEA country or Switzerland prior to 31st December 2020.

The closing of this route after Brexit means that such families are no longer exempt from standard immigration controls and have to apply and pay for family visas before they can settle in the UK.

The new findings draw on responses to the 'Migration and Citizenship after Brexit' survey, the first major insight, by Lancaster University and the University of Birmingham, of how Brexit and the Covid-19

pandemic have impacted on the lives of those moving between the UK and EU.

Of the 2,024 [survey respondents](#), 418 (21 per cent) British, EU/EEA and non-EU/EEA nationals living in the UK or the EU, identified they were part of a mixed-status family (families with at least one close member holding a different citizenship or migration status from the others).

Among them, the difference in status that Brexit had introduced was often presented as a cause for concern.

As one Hungarian woman, in her 40s living in the UK, explained, this had forced her "to choose between me being a second-class citizen or my husband risking not being able to get permanent residency and risk being unable to receive pension."

For British citizens living in the EU/EEA, concerns about the terms on which they would be able to return to the UK with non-British family members were a common response to the Brexit-borne differentiation of statuses with families.

As a British woman, in her 30s, living in France, said: "It means I can't leave for more than a few months if something happens to family overseas. My partner can't come to the UK without applying for a visa even to care for a relative. We're worried we'll get separated at the airport."

Lead author of the report Dr. Elena Zambelli, of Lancaster University, said: "Overall, the picture that emerges shows that, for some, Brexit introduced borders into their lives. Families that previously shared the rights to Free Movement within the EU, remade as mixed-status families with differentiated rights to mobility.

"For other families, who already had mixed migration statuses, Brexit deepened the impacts of the borders on their lives. This reveals further impacts of Brexit at the level of the family, making, fracturing and reconstituting their members' ties within one or multiple countries and affecting their mobility and settlement options as a family.

"The survey showed their concerns are often accompanied by strong negative feelings, in consequence of Brexit finding themselves for the first time questioned about their entitlement to live and move in and out of their country of choice based on will and/or need."

Other findings show:

- 'Family' represents the main reason given by respondents who changed their country of residence since 2016, and its frequency was almost double that in the overall survey sample (+ 14%).
- Three out of four respondents (75%) reported that, since the Brexit referendum, citizenship/migration status differences within their family had been an issue of concern; half (50%) relayed that these had affected their decisions to move or stay put.
- For British citizens in the EU who secured temporary residence and EU citizens in the UK who secured pre-settled status under the Withdrawal Agreement, there remain lingering uncertainties as to what will happen when it lapses and what effects it will have on the mixed-status families they are part of.

**More information:** Elena Zambelli et al, British-European families after Brexit, *Migzen* (2022). [DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.6834639](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6834639)

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