

**BREXIT  
AND THE  
BRITISH  
IN FRANCE**



**Michaela Benson**



## About the project

This report is based on findings from the *BrExpats* research project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council through their UK in a Changing Europe Initiative (Grant Number ES/R000875/1). This was a longitudinal study of Brexit and its implications for UK nationals living in other European Union member states. From May 2017 until January 2020, the project team tracked the Brexit negotiations and what they mean for the political rights, social and financial entitlements, identity, citizenship and belonging of Britons living in the EU-27. In particular, the project team documented how the protracted uncertainties about what Brexit means for citizens' rights—the rights and entitlements derived from exercising Freedom of Movement—were experienced by UK nationals living across the EU-27, and with what consequences for their ongoing emotional and practical choices.







## Contents

- 1 Executive summary
- 4 Introduction
- 5 British emigrations
- 6 The UK, the European Union and Freedom of Movement
- 11 Explaining British migration to France
- 14 The British in France today
- 16 “Brexit hasn’t happened yet, but it is “affecting us big time”
- 23 Living with and through Brexit
- 35 Conclusion
- 37 Recommendations

## Executive summary

Almost four years after the Referendum, many Britons living in France are still in the dark about what Brexit means for their future lives in France.

France hosts the second largest number of UK nationals in the EU27, and is home to approximately 150,000 Britons. Faced with a lack of clear information, unresolved questions and confusion over new residency requirements, Britons in France are taking matters into their own hands in order to secure their futures, for example by applying for residence permits or French citizenship. However, their experiences have been uneven, often as the result of varying personal circumstances. On a personal level, many have come to question previously taken-for-granted identities as Britons and Europeans. Brexit has sparked family feuds, and uncovered previously hidden antagonisms of family members about their decision to live elsewhere in Europe.

These are the core themes of *Brexit and the British in France*, which summarises the key findings of extensive, longitudinal research conducted from 2017-20 with UK nationals living in France.

### Key findings

*Almost four years on, Britons living in France still feel in the dark about what Brexit means for their lives*

- It remains unclear what future status British citizens currently living in France will hold; the residence permits they have been advised to apply for are just temporary measures that will determine their eligibility for this future status.
- Official communications from the UK and French governments were slow to clarify what Britons living in France should do to secure their futures, and many have been unclear about where to turn for reliable information about specific concerns.
- They feel let down by the UK Government, while their encounters with the French state, often in local municipal offices, have created further confusion as local officers similarly find themselves lacking in the relevant information to give appropriate advice. This has left Britons in France with a sense that they are nobody's responsibility but their own.
- The newly passed Withdrawal Agreement (WA) ensures that UK citizens who have lawfully exercised their treaty rights will be able to stay in France and outlines the terms that will guide this. However, it does little to resolve other issues that concern them, including the value of pensions and other income exported from the UK, continued freedom of movement within the EU, and the terms on which Britons in France will be able to return to Britain with non-British partners.

*Britons in France are responding to Brexit by taking matters into their own hands – but the results are uneven*

- In the absence of official advice about the routes they should take to secure their futures, from an early stage many Britons started to take matters into their own hands. This has included applying for the residence permits available to EU citizens and applying for French citizenship.
- It is clear that Brexit has already had uneven outcomes and consequences for the lives of British citizens living in France, not least because before the referendum very few Britons living in France had residence permits and French officials have struggled with the surge in applications.
- Personal circumstances such as chronic and terminal illnesses, periods of unemployment, reliance on benefits and relationship breakdowns, have made some people ill-placed to respond to the challenges Brexit presents for their lives.
- Further, it has become clear that applying for residence permits has had uneven outcomes. For some, these applications have become the site on which they are found to lack evidence of their lawful residence, and in on which in a few rare cases they are judged—often on the ground of insufficient resources—not to be lawfully resident as European citizens, and thus to have no right to residence.

*Britons in France are questioning their previously taken-for-granted identities*

- UK nationals living in France have been questioning what it means to be British in France: their understandings of themselves as British, and the values they associated with being British, were also shaped by their understanding of their relationship to Europe and Europeaness.
- Participants' feelings about Brexit have been mediated by their social relationships in the UK and in France. As well as sharing stories of family feuds sparked by Brexit, unique to these Britons are accounts of family members' newly disclosed antagonisms about their decision to live elsewhere in Europe.
- Participants' perceptions of how the UK government has dealt (or failed to deal) with the concerns and issues that Brexit has raised for them are also significant factors in how they understand their continuing relationship to Britain.







## Introduction

Brexit and the British in France focuses on summarising the findings of empirical research conducted with UK nationals living in France over the course of the Brexit negotiations from 2017-20. This research was conducted as part of the *BrExpats* research project. With such a volume of research, it has been difficult to report on everything in-depth. This report therefore provides a flavour of the key themes emerging from the research. These themes are unpacked in much more detail in blogs, reports, podcasts, research papers and other media that we have produced over the course of the project and will be further developed in future research outputs. For more information you can consult the project website.<sup>1</sup>

The report begins by providing an account of British migration to France before the Brexit Referendum. Stepping back from Brexit, this looks at the conditions and circumstances that have shaped the possibilities for, and practice of, British migration to France: Britain's historical and contemporary geopolitical position, intra-EU migration, and the relationship between the UK and France.<sup>2</sup> This provides the context for a description of the British in France, and an explanation of who they are in all their diversity, migration and settlement practices. In turn, this sets the stage for understanding the reactions of Britons in France to Brexit. Drawing on their responses and reactions to the Referendum and the negotiations, the report highlights how Brexit brings to fore questions about their relationships to Britain, France and the EU. In particular, it highlights their feelings about losing the right to vote after 15 years—a rule that has led to many of them not having a say in the Referendum and the future of the UK—as well as about what Brexit has made visible about their relationships with friends and family in the UK and France. It also documents their experience of living with prolonged uncertainty about their future over the course of the Brexit negotiations.

It then turns to consider the actions and practices of these Britons living in France as they aim to (partially) secure their futures. Importantly, it highlights how from an early stage and in the absence of formal advice or clear routes to document their residence, many among them were taking matters into their own hands. Yet, as the report reveals, these actions had uneven outcomes; while some easily overcome the obstacles presented by the changing landscape of rights and entitlements brought on by Brexit, it is not so straightforward for others.

Beyond their efforts to secure their futures, a major theme emerging through the report is how they make sense of Brexit through social relationships on the ground in France. These relationships were also the site for the circulation of information, knowledge and support, as well as occasionally for disagreement. Finally, the report draws out the way in which Brexit has brought to the fore questions about identity and belonging, the relationship of these Britons to Britain and Britishness, but also to Europe and Europeanness.

---

<sup>1</sup> The project website is available at <https://brexitbritsabroad.org>.

<sup>2</sup> This report is inspired by the theoretical framework of practice stories, based on strong structuration theory, that we have used in other writing. See for example: Benson, M. and O'Reilly, K. (2018) *Lifestyle Migration and Colonial Traces in Malaysia and Panama*, London: Palgrave, and O'Reilly, K. (2012) *International Migration and Social Theory*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.

## British emigrations

This report starts by taking a step back from Brexit to look at the conditions and circumstances which have shaped the possibilities for and practice of British migration to France. Providing this context helps to make sense of what Brexit means for UK nationals resident in France, and to locate this within broader understandings of Britain's place in the world, its changing relationship to Europe, and to France.

My starting point here is to locate British migration to France within the broader recognition of the scale and extent of British emigration past and present, an overlooked dimension of Britain's migration story.<sup>3</sup> As historian Jim Hammerton has argued, Britain's emigration rate means that the British population living overseas, 'remains one of the world's largest permanent migrations and is truly global in its spread'.<sup>4</sup> This is a consequence of Britain's position in the world, derived notably from its history of colonialism. Importantly, emigration and the establishment of settler colonies was a fundamental feature of the British Empire. In the context of the global asymmetries that underpin contemporary international migration, colonial legacies shape the ease with which British citizens can today cross borders and settle elsewhere in the world. These also shape the relative lack of scrutiny of their rights to enter other sovereign states. Relative to the challenges that some other people face in crossing borders, British passport holders are undeniably privileged in consequence of this history.

Importantly, this recognition of privilege is first and foremost a consideration of the structural advantages held by those in possession of British passports and the cultural capital associated with being British in the field of international migration. It does not account for how this articulates with personal circumstances and the access to resources and assets that further shape the migrant experience. This is an important observation, given that UK nationals living abroad are as diverse as the resident British population in the UK. As such, it includes people of all ages—from children through to the elderly—of different genders, sexual orientations and class backgrounds, as well as People of Colour, those with disabilities and chronic health conditions, and individuals from all the constituent nations of the UK.<sup>5</sup> Individual biographies and circumstances shape access to the resources required to support migration—whether economic or cultural capital—or the opportunities available to the individual—for employment, housing etc. But it is also the case that experiences of crossing borders and settlement are uneven. Notable within this, for example, are the higher levels of scrutiny experienced by British People of Colour as they seek to cross borders.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> This has been a recurrent theme running through the research, and a topic that I have been writing and discussing extensively over the past few years. This includes the short essay I wrote for the online platform *Discover Society*, 'Brexit and rethinking the British in Europe', available at <https://discoversociety.org/2019/02/06/focus-brexit-and-rethinking-the-british-in-europe/> and my guest appearances on the *Surviving Society* [<https://soundcloud.com/user-622675754/e046-michaela-benson-retrieving-emigration-histories>] and *Streetsigns* [<https://soundcloud.com/goldsmithsuol/emigration-nation-street-signs-cucr>] podcasts.

<sup>4</sup> Hammerton, A.J., 2017. *Migrants of the British diaspora since the 1960s: Stories from modern nomads*. Manchester University Press. p. 9

<sup>5</sup> Challenging stereotypes about UK nationals living overseas has been central to the *BrExpats* research project. The *BrExpats* project team have produced a set of outputs that focus on this, including articles for BBC News [<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-46632854>] and the LSE Brexit Blog [<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2018/10/01/long-read-lets-ditch-the-stereotypes-about-britons-who-live-in-the-eu/>].

<sup>6</sup> Benson, M. and Lewis, C. 2019. *Brexit, British People of Colour in the EU-27 and everyday racism in Britain and Europe*. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 42(13), pp. 2211-2228. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2019.1599134>



Therefore, drawing attention to structural privilege needs to be matched by a recognition that privilege is never absolute: it scales to individual circumstances and biographies.

What this highlights is that EU citizenship and Britain's relationship with the EU and its member states are only part of the story for understanding British migration to the EU-27. It remains to be seen how and to what extent Brexit reconfigures these wider privileges which have undoubtedly facilitated and enabled British migration and settlement around the world, including within Europe. Below, I focus in greater detail on the relationships between Britain and the EU, and between Britain and France, as they have more immediate relevance for understanding and framing British migration to France and how Brexit takes shape in this context.<sup>7</sup>

## The UK, the European Union and Freedom of Movement

The UK's position within the European Union introduced a further tier to the structures of privilege that shape British emigration. Since the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, UK nationals have been entitled in law to Freedom of Movement (FOM). These FOM directives are linked to the free movement of capital. While legislation is weighted towards those who are economically active, additional provisions were brought in to permit the migration of the economically inactive—e.g. students and retirees—subject to their access to sufficient resources and health insurance. What this means is that European citizens have conditional access to residence, settlement and employment within the EU that is not extended to Third Country Nationals (TCNs). In practice, these rights are mediated in various ways by individual member states. Indeed, many countries around the EU require that EU and EEA citizens register their residence if they plan to stay in the country for longer than three months. The procedures that accompany such registration vary, but this is the point at which people are judged to meet the conditional requirements for lawful residence as laid out by the EU's Freedom of Movement Directives. While some states operate compulsory or de facto systems of registration for EU citizens, there are also states where these systems are conspicuously absent, including France (and, notably, the UK [before it left the EU]).

### A (brief) introduction to Freedom of Movement AKA citizens' rights

Freedom of Movement (FOM) is one of the four fundamental freedoms of the European Union, together with the movement of goods, capital, and services. Free movement of people was inscribed in the Treaty on the European Union—signed in Maastricht in 1992 and often referred to as the Maastricht Treaty—and is linked to the EU citizenship, a status best described as quasi-citizenship.

As it says on the European Parliament website:

---

<sup>7</sup> Benson, M. 2019. 'Constellations of privilege: the racialised and classed formations of Britons living in rural France', in Leonard, P. and Walsh, K. (eds) *British Migration: Understanding contemporary British out-migration and its global impact*. London: Routledge. pp. 23-39.

*The Treaty of Maastricht introduced the notion of EU citizenship to be enjoyed automatically by every national of a Member State. It is this EU citizenship that underpins the right of persons to move and reside freely within the territory of the Member States. The Lisbon Treaty confirmed this right, which is also included in the general provisions on the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice.* <sup>8</sup>

It is worth noting that the other three freedoms—of capital, goods, and services—were established prior to free movement of people, and that the latter was primarily established to enable the movement of economically-active people, or to be more precise, the movement of labour. Freedom of movement for students, pensioners, and the unemployed, as well as for their families, was guaranteed later. Even now, where the European Commission website refers to employment, it implies that free movement is more about labour than any other kind of movement. EU citizens, they suggest, are entitled to:

- look for a job in another EU country;
- work there without needing a work permit;
- reside there for that purpose;
- stay there even after employment has finished; and
- enjoy equal treatment with nationals in access to employment, working conditions and all other social and tax advantages.

Importantly, EU citizenship is derived from national citizenship of an EU member state; it does not sit independently of this. While not full citizens of the states within which they live and work, the terms and conditions of movement and settlement within the EU position EU citizens as relatively privileged in comparison to TCNs migrating from countries outside the EU.

For UK nationals living in other EU member states and EU nationals living in the UK, FOM—also dubbed citizens’ rights—was the primary legal instrument supporting their rights to residence and social entitlements as long as the United Kingdom was a member of the European Union. Ireland is a notable exception to this due to the existence of the Common Travel Area (CTA), a Free Movement agreement that precedes FOM. Britain’s exit from the EU means the repatriation (to the UK) of laws including those relating to the rights of EU citizens formerly resident in the UK under EU law provisions, and the removal of EU citizenship and its related rights from UK nationals living in elsewhere in the EU.

### **Freedom of Movement - from opportunity to constraint**

In principle, FOM was first and foremost about meeting the demands of the labour market, framed to benefit those who were economically active. As legal scholar Charlotte O’Brien has argued, EU citizenship and the legal structures that support it are market-based, in consequence stratifying the population of the EU.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/147/free-movement-of-persons>

<sup>9</sup> See for example, <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=457&langId=en>

<sup>10</sup> O’Brien, C., 2017. *Unity in adversity: EU citizenship, social justice and the cautionary tale of the UK*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

The conditions relating to FOM—not placing a burden on the nation-state, holding comprehensive health cover—have been unevenly implemented to restrict the mobility of the poor, with the effect of discriminating against racialised minorities, most notably the Roma. This deepening of inequalities within and between EU citizen populations offers important context for making sense of Brexit and its impacts.

However, beyond the legal principles and their implementation, understanding intra-EU mobility also needs to account for individual practice. What becomes clear is that individual migration within the EU—like other forms of international migration—is rarely driven solely by economic motivations; even when the movement is for work, other factors intersect the decisions that people make about where they want to live and work. Many British citizens living in other member states understood FOM literally as the freedom to move across borders; prior to Brexit there was very limited knowledge of the conditional framing of the right to free movement and settlement among those taking part in the research.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the prevalence of these lay understandings, the practice of moving within Europe may often be at odds with the idea that this is in any sense a frictionless experience. Indeed, earlier research by Louise Ackers and Peter Dwyer with UK nationals living in Europe pointed to the tensions between EU integration and the continuing significance of the nation-state in shaping access to rights and entitlements:

*In practice, the residency and social rights that a mobile EU national can claim in another Member State depend on the type of social contribution they have made and their personal relationships ... those whose mobility is not connected to employment derive significantly inferior social entitlements when resident in a host Member State.*<sup>12</sup>

What this highlights is that despite the legal privilege to cross borders, this is not experienced as frictionless at the level of the individual. Imaginings that see Freedom of Movement as a borderless Europe are in tension with the impacts of nation-state borders on people's everyday lives. Individuals are variously positioned, therefore, to overcome the constraints of FOM; in other words, their experience as 'mobile Europeans', even before Brexit, was socially structured. In principle, while all European citizens hold the right to Freedom of Movement, for some among them the ability to exercise such Freedom and its outcomes for individual lives has been constrained by other factors.

---

<sup>11</sup> Collins, K. and O'Reilly, K. 2018. What does Freedom of Movement mean to British citizens living in the EU27? Freedom, mobility and the experience of loss. Project Report. Goldsmiths, University of London, London. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.00027352>

<sup>12</sup> Ackers, L. and Dwyer, P., 2004. Fixed laws, fluid lives: the citizenship status of post-retirement migrants in the European Union. *Ageing & Society*, 24(3): 451-475 [pg. 451]. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X0300165X>; see also O'Reilly, K. 2007, 'Intra-European Migration and the mobility-enclosure dialectic', *Sociology*, 41(2): 277-293. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038507074974>







## UK Nationals, FOM and EU integration

The relaxation of borders between EU countries has undoubtedly enabled the migration of a broad cross-section of British citizens to other EU member states, pursuing, in no particular order, love, work, study, investment and lifestyle. While the most recent estimates released by the Office for National Statistics report that 784,900 British citizens live in the EU-26 (ONS 2018), this is likely to be a significant underestimate.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the scale of British migration to other EU member states is a salutary reminder that Britain's relationship to FOM is best understood as two-way traffic. In a context in which ending Free Movement has driven the political agenda, this reminder that UK nationals have also benefitted from FOM is important.

Indeed, Britons living in elsewhere in the EU are part of the success story of EU integration. According to ONS statistics 79% of them are of working age and below;<sup>14</sup> they are economically and social integrated, working in local and European labour markets, in dual national relationships. These headline statements offer a significant contradiction to prominent accounts which fixate on elderly British communities in the south of Spain. While it is undeniable that these communities exist, they are a small part of the overall picture of British migration to Europe.

The experience of migration and settlement are made possible by the reciprocal arrangements laid out by FOM directives. To a degree, these have been adjusted to reflect the different circumstances that drive migration. Provision has been made, for example, for those retiring from Britain to other EU member states; coordination of social security across the EU entitles them to benefits in kind in their country of residence, including access to healthcare through the S1 scheme. At national level, the UK government's support for the uprating of pensions for its pensioners in the EU also frames the possibilities and experience of migration and settlement for retirees. Notably, the UK has fiscal responsibility for these dimensions, resting as they do on social security contributions made in the UK over the course of working lives. For those who have been working in other EU27 countries, provisions in the directives permit the aggregation of social security contributions and their state of residence covers their access to benefits including healthcare. EU citizenship also gives people the right to vote in European Parliament Elections, vote and stand for office in local elections in their place of residence. This signals the complexity of making sense of how people's lives are supported by FOM, and what is being untangled through Brexit as UK nationals living in the EU lose their rights as EU citizens.

## France and FOM in practice

Since 2009, migration to France from other countries on the European continent has exceeded migration from any other continent. The Institut national de la statistique et des études économique (INSEE) reported in 2012 that Europeans accounted for 46% of all those entering France for the purposes of long-term migration.<sup>15</sup> This increasing Europeanisation of migration

---

<sup>13</sup> There are significant challenges in providing accurate statistics on the number of UK nationals living overseas, as Karen O'Reilly makes clear in an article published in the *Independent*. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/british-citizens-europe-residents-eu-brexite-a8332986.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Statistics available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/articles/whatinformationisthereonbritishmigrantslivingineurope/jan2017#number-of-british-citizens-living-in-europe-in-2011-by-age>

<sup>15</sup> Statistics available at: <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/1281393>

to France was further documented in the 2017 census, and is predominantly comprised of those migrating from Portugal, the UK, Spain, Italy and Germany.

There is no formal requirement in France for EU citizens to apply for formal documentation attesting to their lawful residence. Even though there are residence permits available for EU citizens—as per conditions laid out by the European Union—there has been low uptake. Simply, residence permits for EU citizens in France are not compulsory and access to other services—e.g. health care, employment, housing—is not contingent upon these. Until the Referendum, this meant that very few Britons living in France had documentation attesting to their lawful residence there as European citizens. France therefore faces a significant administrative challenge and burden in dealing with the future rights of its resident UK nationals because of its previous lack of scrutiny of whether EU citizens settling there were lawfully resident. Notably, this challenge is less profound in other EU countries where there are well-developed administrative systems for documenting the residence of non-national EU citizens.

## Explaining British migration to France

Importantly, contemporary British migration to France takes place not only in the context of an integrating Europe, but also within the long history of a (continuing) relationship between the two countries. This relationship shapes imaginings of France—rural and urban alike—and the lives available there, and has given rise to familiarity, experience and capabilities that are put to use by Britons in navigating migration and settlement. For example, this relationship is evident in British schools, with French the most common modern language taught. It is also at play in the predilection for the French countryside, coastal and ski resorts as holiday destinations among the British middle classes. This is notable in a context largely absent of mass tourism development, the cultural value placed on France and French that drives tourism, from Paris' art, iconic sights and neighbourhoods to the wine and gastronomy found across the country and its bucolic landscape.

British tourism in France then, is largely individualised: from the promise of taking your own car—by boat or through the Channel Tunnel—to the prevalence of gîtes and campsites offering accommodation (in contrast to large hotels). The shape of British migration to France echoes these tourist itineraries, migration is self-initiated, planned and executed, the cultural value of France, perpetuated through travel literature (e.g. Pater Mayle's *A Year in Provence*) holding sway in the lives that these migrants imagined for themselves. This is notably different, for example, from prominent explanations of British migration to Spain, a context where infrastructures and services—and associated intermediaries—have been developed specifically to encourage investment through 'residential tourism', marketed at Northern European retirees.<sup>16</sup> A comparison between the factors that shape British migration to rural France and British migration to Spain offers valuable insights into differences in the way that particular destinations are imagined and represented, and their consequences for patterns of settlement.

---

<sup>16</sup> You can find out more about how the context in Spain shapes British migration and settlement in Karen O'Reilly's report *Brexit and the British in Spain*: <https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.00028223>.



## Escaping to the country ... in rural France

The British valuation of the French countryside as a veritable rural idyll—replete with connotations of close-knit community and a simpler way of life—offers some initial insights into how imaginings of a better way of life drive British migration to rural France. The significance of this, however, lies in its comparison to life in Britain. Rural France is presented as offering escape from disillusionment with life in Britain whether conceived in terms of poor working conditions, the fast pace of life, politics, societal transformation, or ‘keeping up with the Joneses’. In many ways, such narratives reproduce the classic distinction between the urban and the rural identified as being at the core of many counter-urbanisation movements, including international migrations. Alongside the relatively low cost of property and the low cost of living such understandings shape the prospects and opportunities for realising a better way of life, and have resulted in considerable British migration to the French countryside.

In some places, this has led to a notable British presence. Both the dubbing of the Dordogne department as ‘Dordogneshire’ and the presence of British community formations from branches of British political parties to sports teams, and the antagonism towards the incoming British population documented in some parts of Brittany point to the visible concentrations of such Britons. However, beyond these observable communities, British settlement in rural France is dispersed. This reflects the individualised tourism practices that influence migration to these areas, and in consequence, the co-ethnic associational life noted in studies of British citizens in Spain is not so much in evidence in France.

The mixed economy of the French countryside—comprising agriculture, viticulture and tourism—is significant in making sense of British migration to rural France. The countryside offers economic opportunities in ways that are often overlooked in research on migration. What this means is that while rural France is an attractive destination for British retirees, it also attracts people of working age seeking entrepreneurial opportunities, notably in tourism, agriculture and viticulture. These are opportunities that might be difficult to access in the UK (where the high cost of living and property increases the associated risks of setting up such businesses), or which are better developed in France, providing greater opportunities and support. Even among those Britons setting up businesses, rural France and the life available there are narrated as offering a better quality of life that is closely associated with the rural landscape and community.

Individual circumstances intervene in migration, from the resources and assets on which people can draw to facilitate migration and finance the better way of life they seek—for example, from savings made through income and property sales in the UK, access to exportable benefits (e.g. pensions, disability living allowance), to personal circumstances ranging from family breakdown and bereavement to redundancy and unemployment—that build up and coalesce to bring about migration. Such circumstances are often narrated by British migrants as significant turning points in their lives. Observations of the value of the French countryside made by British incomers signal the prominence of lifestyle considerations in their decision to migrate, but these are nevertheless often articulated to account for very different individual circumstances.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Benson, M. 2011. *The British in Rural France: Lifestyle Migration and the Ongoing Quest for a Better Way of Life*. Manchester University Press.

## Overlooked urban migrations

While British migration to rural France has come to be perceived as the norm, migrations that more closely resemble labour migration have been overlooked for the most part. Yet, it is undeniable that France's urban settings are home to Britons of all ages, moving in pursuit of employment opportunities, not only to study but also for family reunion. Paris, for example, has a long history of British settlement and is currently home to one of the largest urban concentrations of British migrants in the world.

While there are business communities that support British business owners and workers, expatriate organisations (from churches through to social groups, and British-themed pubs, restaurants and cafes), these do not draw in the breadth of the UK national population resident in these towns and cities. The presence of Britons in France's big cities is largely unremarked upon in scholarship but also in public and political discourse. In part, this is linked to a broader tendency in which skilled migrants (working in middle-class professions) moving within Europe are deemed unremarkable in the problem- and policy-focused arena of migration discourse and scholarship. Further, that these British populations are economically and socially integrated, working in French, European and transnational labour markets, means that they are rarely identifiable as a co-ethnic community and so do not stand out in these urban settings.<sup>18</sup>

Migration to France's cities may be variously driven by offers of work and employment—this includes inter-company transfer, a route shaping the migration of UK nationals to Toulouse working in the city's aerospace industry—but it might also be less structured than this—a movement in search of opportunities (made possible, in part, by Freedom of Movement within the EU). It is also clear that personal relationships might play a role in migration: British-French couples and dual national families are a significant part of the story about British migration to France. Further, there are those who choose, in retirement, to settle in towns and cities, bucking a wider trend for retirement migrants to choose rural or coastal areas. No doubt the appeal of cities includes the quality of life they offer, from cultural and leisure opportunities to the ease of access to services such as healthcare.

What these brief descriptions show is that there are diverse motivations behind migration; the appeal of France, rural and urban, and the complex life circumstances which lead to and support migration warn against reducing British migration to France to one group of people—such as a focus on retirement might enable—or one type of migration. In turn, their lives variously rest on the provisions laid out in FOM legislation.

---

<sup>18</sup> While a small body of work has focused on the case of British settlement in the French countryside, research that focuses exclusively on the case of British citizens living in France's metropolitan regions is scarce. The work of Sam Scott with its focus on British residents in Paris and the thesis of Laurence Clabe-Bundy which examined British settlement in Toulouse are of note. See Scott, S., 2004. Transnational exchanges amongst skilled British migrants in Paris. *Population, Space and Place*, 10(5), pp.391-410. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.345>; Scott, S., 2006. The social morphology of skilled migration: the case of the British middle class in Paris. *Journal of ethnic and migration studies*, 32(7), pp.1105-1129. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830600821802>; Clabé-Bundy, L., 2010. *Une bulle britannique sur la Garonne?: mode de vie, de consommation et de sociabilité des expatriés professionnels britanniques en région toulousaine* Toulouse 2: Unpublished PhD Thesis.

## The British in France today

France hosts the second largest number of UK nationals in the EU-27. While official statistics produced by the Office for National Statistics state that it is home to approximately 150,000 Britons, the lack of registration in France combined with known inaccuracies in the census data from which these statistics are drawn mean that this is likely to be an underestimate. According to INSEE those born in Britain accounted for 5% of all migrants to France in 2012, a percentage matched by those of Spanish origin in France, and only exceeded by those originating in Portugal (8%), Morocco (7%) and Algeria (7%).<sup>19</sup> The statistics also reveal that 50% of this British population are educated to degree-level or above, making them one of the most highly educated migrant populations in France; and while not a perfect proxy, this indicates levels of cultural capital commensurate with middle-class status.

While the absolute numbers of UK nationals living in France are disputed, what they do make visible is the geography of British migration to France, with some areas attracting larger populations. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Île-de-France—home to Paris, and the most populous of the 18 regions in France—accounts for 13% of this population. However, outside of the capital, statistics produced by INSEE document that the two regions in the southwest, Nouvelle Aquitaine and Occitanie, are home to the largest numbers of British citizens comprising 43% of the total population of UK nationals living in France.<sup>20</sup> Taken together, these regions stretch from the Atlantic coast in the west, to the Pyrenees in the south and the Mediterranean coast in the east. Both Nouvelle Aquitaine and Occitanie are predominantly rural, their economies supported by agriculture, viticulture, and tourism. The capitals of these regions, Bordeaux and Toulouse, bring further diversity to their economies through industrial and research-oriented sectors. The presence of large numbers of British citizens in these areas might at one level attest to the appeal of the French countryside; however, it is also important to recognise the ongoing transformations of the urban economy, that have made Toulouse France's fourth-largest and fastest growing metropolitan area, with its world-leading aerospace and defence industry – notably Airbus and its subsidiaries – and its wide-ranging university sector attracting skilled professionals from across the world, including the British.

### Diverse motivations, diverse lives

The British population of France is diverse: there are UK nationals of all ages and types living in France. Indeed, the diversity of the British population at large is likely reflected in its diaspora. Migration and its motivations may intersect with different points in the life course, drawing in a broad cross-section of the British population in all its diversity; those of working age migrating as individuals, couples or families with young children alongside those reaching the ends of their formal working lives. There are dual nationals among them, some holding their British citizenship alongside that of another European Union member state. Their starting point may not be Britain, but other parts of Europe or the world; it is common for them to have lived outside of Britain before moving to France. The decision to migrate is often complex, related to life course and individual biographies. It draws together a range of practical and financial

---

<sup>19</sup> Statistics available at: <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/12813933>

<sup>20</sup> INSEE, 2014. *Les immigrés récemment arrivés en France: une immigration de plus en plus européenne*. INSEE Premier No. 1524

considerations; encompassing ideas about how to live—as a family, as a couple—shaped by culturally significant imaginings of life in France; responding to employment or entrepreneurial opportunities, or seeking these in the wake of migration. In other words, these decisions do not take place in a vacuum, and neither do the lives resulting from them.<sup>21</sup>

Economic activity amongst the British living in France includes those who are employed in a range of French and European labour sectors full- or part-time; those who are self-employed or freelance; and small business owners. Their economic circumstances vary significantly, as do their continued links back to the United Kingdom. While for some moving to France is considered a permanent move, for others, it is a move for the time being, open-minded to the possibility that they might move on elsewhere, or repatriate.

### **Research with the British in (southwest) France in a time of Brexit**

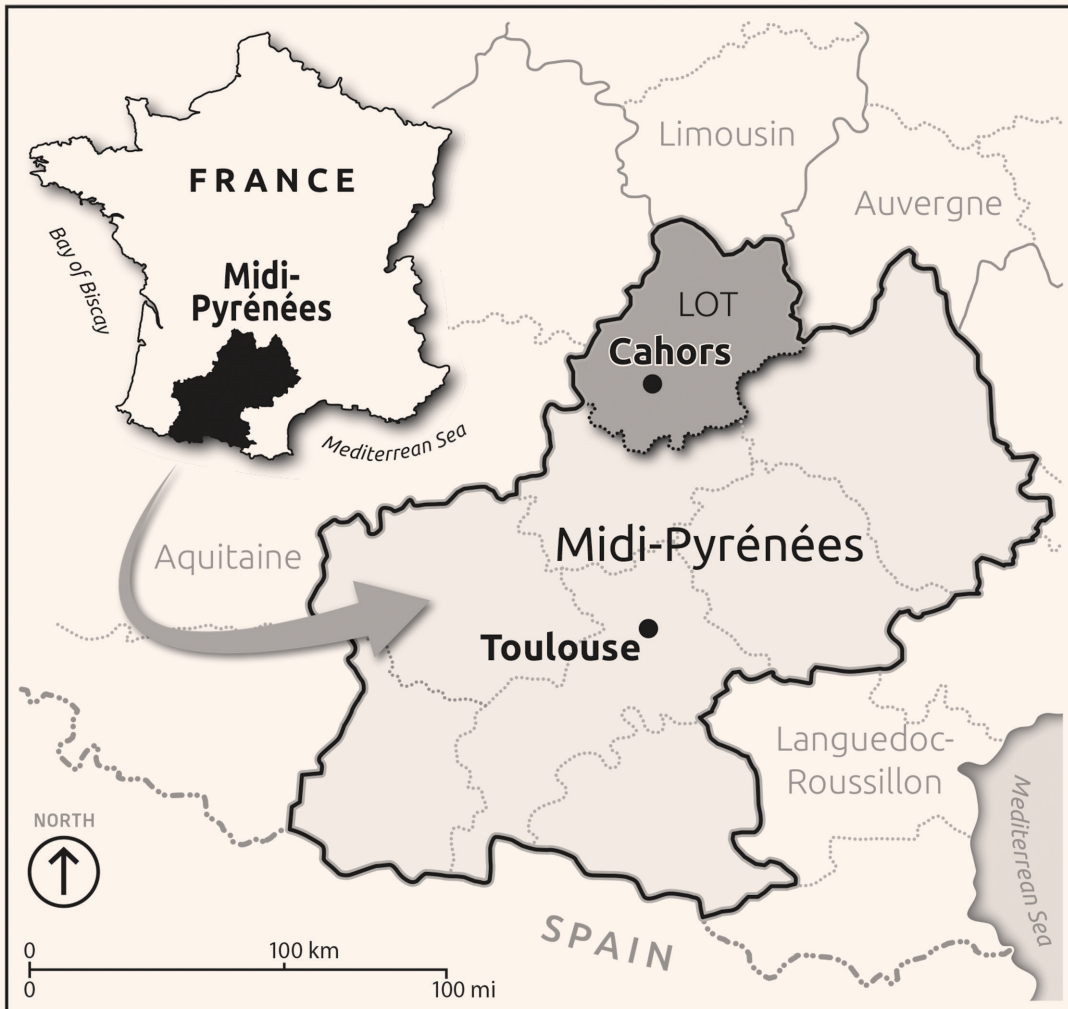
The research for the *BrExpats* project focussed predominantly on Britons who had relocated to the southwest of France. This reflected both the statistical observation that identifies high concentrations of UK nationals in this part of France as well as my prior research in the area. I worked in two field sites, the Lot and Toulouse, in this way hoping to recruit to the project a broad cross-section of the British population in all its diversity. Between June 2017 and March 2019, I conducted four months of fieldwork in France including interviews with 105 people, two focus groups and extensive participant observation. I continued to follow up with many of those taking part in the research via email and phone over the course of 2019. Through the citizens' panel we recruited a further 40 individuals living in a range of locations in France. Those taking part in this research included an almost equal number of men and women, between the ages of 22 and 80, in a range of occupations, employed and self-employed, as well as retirees and some who were unemployed. While many British couples participated in the research, there were also people who were in relationships with French or third country nationals. To give a sense of the diversity of this population, participants in the research included:

- A couple moving to Toulouse on an inter-company transfer, who had their first child in France and then returned to the UK;
- A university professor married to a French woman he met in London;
- A young woman in her twenties, who had moved to France at the age of 14, completed her education up to Bacc+5 in France and was currently unemployed;
- A young family who moved to France after the referendum when both parents lost their jobs;
- A personal trainer in her 30s, with three children, who had relocated to France with her husband when he started playing for a French rugby team (since retired from professional sports);
- A couple who retired to France after working for 30+ years in Hong Kong;
- The (now retired) manager of a large international company, who had been living in France with his wife and children for 25+ years;
- A self-employed man in his fifties, who was a local councillor.

---

<sup>21</sup> Benson, M. 2010. 'The context and trajectory of lifestyle migration: the case of the British residents of southwest France', *European Societies* 12(1): 45-64. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616690802592605>.

Our participants in France also include those with disabilities and limiting long-term illnesses, People of Colour, retirees who had worked in both the public and private sectors as well as children and students, and wealthy people alongside those who were barely making ends meet. In short, the diversity of the British population is also reflected among the British who have made their homes and lives in France.



## **“Brexit hasn’t happened yet, but it is affecting us big time”**

What became clear was that from the referendum onwards, Brexit had an immediate impact on many Britons living in France, as the quotation above, from Alice, a long-term resident of the Lot, makes clear. This can be read through their visceral responses to the referendum or in their concerns about what Britain’s exit from the EU would mean for their lives. Importantly, this signals that while Britain had yet to leave the European Union, and even before the terms of the citizens’ rights negotiations were agreed (much less implemented by European Member States), the change to Britain’s relationship with the EU, symbolised by the outcome of the referendum, was already being experienced and internalised by these Britons.







In what follows, I provide a flavour of the ways in which those participating in the research have responded to the Brexit process. I then draw out how their changing legal status has been managed in France, setting the scene for the consideration of how these Britons have lived with and through Brexit.

### **Without a say (in the Referendum)**

An unprecedented number of overseas voters registered to vote in the 2016 Referendum. Until 2015, the number of overseas voters had never exceeded 35,000; and yet, General Election 2015 saw this increase to 106,000.<sup>22</sup> In 2016, the year of the Referendum, this rose to 264,000. These rises can be attributed to the roll-out of online registration, which made it easier to register to vote, in addition to their evident interest in the outcome of the EU referendum. This number has continued to increase since the referendum, one measure through which the politicisation of Britons resident in the EU-27 through Brexit might be documented.

This is all set within a context where those UK nationals who have lived outside the UK for 15 years lose the right to vote in national elections. Significantly, it was often in their attempts to register to participate in the Referendum—which they felt might have significant implications for their continued ability to live their lives—that many people became aware for the first time of these restrictions on their voting rights. For those disenfranchised Britons living in France, their knowledge that France never restricts the voting rights of its overseas citizens and, further, that they have dedicated political representation shaped their indignation at being denied the vote. For some, this concern about their voting rights in the UK may also have gained further significance given the imminent loss of their status as EU citizens, and with it the right to vote and stand for office in local elections.<sup>23</sup>

It is important to highlight that their indignation about their exclusion from the Referendum was set within a broader context where, irrespective of political allegiance, many were ambivalent about whether UK citizens living overseas should exercise a vote on domestic politics in the UK. Such ambivalence had often translated into a failure to exercise the right to vote since moving abroad. For many though, this ambivalence did not extend to the question of whether they should have been allowed to vote in the referendum, which they understood as an issue which would have direct consequences of their lives and wellbeing.

Emma had lived and worked in France since completing her French degree in the late 1980s. She had been brought up in a very political family, and believed that voting was a right and an obligation. Within two minutes of starting my interview with her, she made clear her thoughts on the disenfranchisement of British citizens living abroad in the 2016 Referendum.

---

<sup>22</sup> For more information see <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-expats-registered-to-vote-in-the-eu-referendum>

<sup>23</sup> British citizens living in France have long taken up the opportunities for local political participation in France. This is documented in the research of Helen Drake and Sue Collard and brought up to date in light of Brexit through the work of Fiona Ferbrache. See Drake, H. and Collard, S., 2008. A case study of intra-EU migration: 20 years of 'Brits' in the Pays d'Auge, Normandy, France. *French Politics*, 6(3), pp. 214-233; Ferbrache, F., 2019. Acts of European citizenship: How Britons resident in France have been negotiating post-Brexit futures. *Geography*, 104(2), pp. 81-88.

*It made me really cross that we weren't allowed to vote for that, because I really felt that it was taking away the right that I had as a British person being totally and utterly intimately concerned by the result of this referendum to not be able to vote on my future, on my children's future and on the future of, I don't know how many British people live in France, just in France, but hundreds of thousands of British people must be concerned by this, and I felt it was really wrong that we weren't allowed to.*

The Conservative party have promised lifetime enfranchisement of overseas voters in their manifestos since 2015 (including 2019). Since the Referendum, this has gained heightened support among UK nationals living overseas and yet, despite consecutive Conservative governments bringing this forward, it has not been realised. UK nationals living overseas for 15 years or more, continued to find themselves unable to vote in General Elections in 2019 and 2017 as well as the 2016 Referendum and General Election 2015.

Britain's relationship to its overseas citizens can be explored through the debate on the overseas vote.<sup>24</sup> Since the Referendum, many of those participating in my research have talked with me about this, presenting it as an example of the UK government's lack of concern about them and their lives. Indeed, this often sets the scene for their discussions about how they cannot rely on the UK government to act in their interests despite their being British citizens.

### **Responding to the 2016 Referendum**

Talking about Brexit often took as a starting point their realisation that Britain had voted to leave, their feelings and sentiments about Brexit shaped by their social relationships with friends and family back in the UK, as well as in France. Talking about Brexit often took as a starting point their realisation that Britain had voted to leave, their feelings and sentiments about Brexit shaped by their social relationships with friends and family back in the UK, as well as in France.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, when the interviews turned to discussion of the outcome of the referendum, emotions often ran high. Those taking part in the research in France described how they had been glued to the television on the night of the referendum, or awoken to the news the following morning. Disbelief was a common sentiment that subsequently gave way to uncertainty, grief and sadness over the of the Brexit negotiations. On more than one occasion, people choked back tears as we spoke, dabbing at the corner of their eyes to stop these rolling down their face.

Verity had moved to the countryside in the environs of Toulouse at the age of 26, giving up her job in the City of London and taking up a job in a local estate agency. Now in her early 40s, she was a new mother when the Referendum happened.

---

<sup>24</sup> While this report does not address the issue of the Overseas Vote in detail, the project team have closely followed the debates about extending the enfranchisement of Overseas Voters to a Vote for Life. Our particular focus has been on what this makes visible about how the British government views and understands its overseas citizens. This has resulted in a set of outputs discussing this issue, including my article 'Who do governments represent? The history of voting rights for Brits Abroad' for the online platform *Europe Street News*, available at: <https://europestreet.news/who-do-governments-represent-the-history-of-voting-rights-for-brits-abroad/> and Episode 19 of the *Brexit Brits Abroad* Podcast, 'Who cares about UK citizens living in the EU27', available at: <https://brexitbritsabroad.libsyn.com/ep019-who-cares-about-uk-citizens-living-in-the-eu27>.

*... at the time I was still breastfeeding and so I was up at six o'clock ... So I came downstairs with her and put the telly on and I burst into tears, and I went back up and I said to [French husband] I can't believe this ... my whole adult life has been based around Europe, it's been based around the EU.*

For her, and many others who had moved to France in their early adult lives, and who were often in dual national relationships, the Referendum was experienced as an affront to their sense of identity and the lives they had made for themselves. Kate, also in her 40s and living in Toulouse, made this abundantly clear recalling her French husband's words waking up to the news that Britain had voted to leave the EU, 'they have just voted against everything that we are'.

But this wasn't the whole story. There were people among them who did not feel the outcome of the referendum so viscerally, only briefly touching on this as they explained their reasons for living in France and introduced me to their lives there. Further, the story of the research in France also includes a few—admittedly, only a small number—who were pleased with the outcome of the Referendum, who had voted to leave or expressed their support for Britain leaving the EU on a range of grounds. Jack, a passionate Francophile in his 70s who lived in the Lot, described his nervous excitement at the outcome of the Referendum; while Susan, in her 80s and living in the Lot for more than 25 years described placating her granddaughters who were devastated by the outcome, highlighting, 'Britain's a great country'. I state these examples here to point to the diversity within this population and the range of political opinions that it gives rise to.

## **Early concerns**

For many of those I spoke to in France, the outcome of the Referendum raised questions over the terms on which they would be able to continue living their lives there.<sup>25</sup> They described their uncertainty about what this would mean for:

- their access to healthcare and other social entitlements;
- future employment and work opportunities;
- whether their qualifications would continue to be recognised;
- continued Freedom of Movement within the EU;
- what this would mean for the value of their pensions and where they would be taxed;
- whether friends and family would still be able to visit;
- their participation in local politics through becoming local councillors and voting in local elections;
- whether they might be asked to leave France; and
- how the legal basis of their residence in France would be evaluated.

Issues relating to their pensions and other incomes exported to France from the UK were a key source of concern, with people reporting how the turbulence of the exchange rate drops impacted

---

<sup>25</sup> This builds on findings reported in an earlier report which focused in detail on initial research for the project with British citizens living in the Lot: Benson, M. 2017. *What does Brexit mean for British citizens living in the EU27? Talking Brexit with the British in France*. Project Report. Goldsmiths, University of London, London. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.00027350>

impacted on their lives, while also expressing concerns about what their future lives would be like if the UK government discontinued the uprating of their state pensions. David was in his 70s; he explained that his worries were largely about the financial impacts of Brexit that might threaten their ability to continue living in France.

*I'm worried that if the finance houses such as the banks and there's a problem there, my pension originates in England ... I would be worried if things went wrong and there was problems with paying our pension, our old age pension, state pension, if they froze that as well ... and these uncertainties have brought us to the point where we now think, and my wife Helen is very worried about our future here.*

In fact, Helen had been sick with worry; and when I revisited them in 2018, he had taken the decision that they would sell the house in the Lot and move on, to be close to one of their children, either in the UK or in Ireland (where their daughter had settled).

Some of those I spoke to also questioned whether they would still be allowed to own property; while this was never at stake, this signalled to me the extent of the confusion that Brexit had caused. It seemed as though Brexit had caused these British migrants to question everything they had previously been able to take for granted. This seemed indiscriminate, irrespective of whether the thing or right they were concerned about was granted on the basis of their EU citizenship (and therefore contingent on the outcome of the Brexit negotiations) or not. Brexit had resulted in a feeling that everything might be up for grabs, not just the legal basis of their migration, settlement and related rights and entitlements.

It was clear that it was also experienced as throwing their futures into jeopardy. Emily was coming to the end of her current employment contract, and although she had started to prepare to transition from the university sector to the private sector she was worried about what Brexit might do to her ability to secure future employment and on what terms:

*I've started to look around for some companies that could be good ... but then Brexit is supposedly going to be happening six months after, I still don't know if I will have secured a job and a visa by then, or if I can just be able to stay.*

For Ann, who had suffered from serious illness since retiring to France, the concern was about what would happen if she was ill again in the future:

*I was bedridden for four months and I had assistants twice a day, washing and all that, carers came in twice a day, nurses came in once a day, I had physiotherapy ... we had been thinking what on earth do we do in this situation? Because of our health issues medication costs ... €1,000, and money would soon run out at that rate.*

Where they had previously been able to take for granted their rights as EU citizens, they experienced Brexit as a threat to these, bringing in its wake insecurity and uncertainty about their future rights to residence. Indeed, the interviews—which were largely conducted before an agreement had been reached on citizens' rights—took place alongside the negotiations over the future of these rights. As such, while it had been clear since Article 50 was triggered that

there would be changes to the legal terms of residence for UK nationals living in France, it was unclear what this would look like and how it would be implemented.

This initial uncertainty about what the UK leaving the EU would mean for Britons resident overseas would look like, was characteristic of the way Britons living in France (and elsewhere in the EU) understood Brexit, and was prolonged by the negotiations.

### **Citizens' rights negotiations and prolonged uncertainty**

Nothing was on or off the table until Article 50 was triggered in March 2017 and despite the progress of the citizens' rights negotiations, the principle of the Brexit negotiations 'Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed' placed citizens' rights in limbo until the Withdrawal Agreement passed into UK legislation in January 2020.

The consensus reached in December 2017 and now written into the Withdrawal Agreement ensures that UK citizens who have exercised their treaty rights and are 'legally resident' in the EU27 will be able to stay and outlines the terms that will guide this. Notably, there remain some issues outstanding, including the question of continued freedom of movement within the European Union and what happens in the case of posted workers (who are treated by different articles within European Union Law). Beyond this, while the Withdrawal Agreement deals with those rights and entitlements relating to Freedom of Movement directives, it cannot account for how this interplays with individual circumstances. While on a legal level, it provides some assurances about the future status of UK nationals living in the EU26, it does not resolve some of the issues attributable to Brexit by those participating in the research. For example, the volatility of the exchange rate and how this impacts on the incomes of those who are supported by monies held in pounds to be exchanged to euros, a situation, for example, which includes those in receipt of government pensions who are obliged to have this taxed at source in the UK, and those with access to other exportable benefits, including Personal Independence Planning (PIP, previously Disability Living Allowance). It also remained unclear how the terms of the Withdrawal Agreement would be implemented by individual member states<sup>26</sup> until quite some time after the agreement was reached.

The negotiations, with their focus on citizens' rights as a first priority, had been promoted by both the UK government and the EU as offering security for Britons' future lives in the EU and EU citizens living in the UK. However, my conversations with British citizens living in France revealed the opposite. Their confusion, misunderstanding and continued concerns demonstrated an exacerbation of their uncertainty over time.<sup>27</sup>

That the negotiations became a lengthy process caught up in political turbulence in Britain further contributed to the protraction of uncertainty among Britons living in France.

<sup>26</sup> See the earlier report co-authored by the project team and researchers at Migration Policy Institute Europe for more on this: Benton, Meghan; Ahad, Aliyyah; Benson, Michaela; Collins, Katherine; McCarthy, Helen and O'Reilly, Karen. 2018. *Next Steps: Implementing a Brexit Deal for UK Citizens Living in the EU-27*. Project Report. Migration Policy Institute Europe, Brussels. Available at: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/implementing-brexit-deal-uk-citizens-eu>

<sup>27</sup> reassurances, many of those taking part in the research stressed that it did not go far enough and that they were not reassured. See Benson, M., O'Reilly, K. and Collins, K. 2018. *What does Brexit mean for UK citizens living in the EU27? Talking citizens' rights with UK citizens across the EU27*. Project Report. Goldsmiths, University of London, London. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.00027351>

Undoubtedly, this uncertainty has had a more pronounced impact for some than for others; it interplays with personal circumstances that may include chronic and terminal illnesses, periods of unemployment and reliance on benefits, or relationship breakdowns, that might make people ill-placed to respond to the challenges that Brexit presents for their lives.

The themes emerging from my conversations with Britons who have made their homes and lives in France reveal their complex emotions about Brexit, Britain and Europe. While Britain's withdrawal from the EU had not yet taken place, its impacts were being felt in their lives. As the following section demonstrates, their actions and plans for the future shifted in response.

## Living with and through Brexit

In the context of the relaxed approach to the migration of European Citizens to France, signalled by the lack of compulsory requirements for them to register their presence, Brexit has been a steep learning curve for many Britons resident in France. It has also resulted in them turning attention to their relationships to Britain and Britishness, Europe and Europeanness.

### Taking matters into their own hands

Since the Referendum, before any agreements were reached between the UK and EU on the future of citizens' rights, or any official guidance was put forward about how they might secure their futures, British citizens in France started to take action to secure their right to stay in France. The lapse in the practice of registering EU citizens in France was significant in shaping their actions and practices.

#### *Securing the right to stay put*

*Conducting interviews with Britons living in France in 2017, it appeared that there was limited knowledge of the Carte de Séjour (CdS) and Permanent Residence (PR) for EU citizens. This is understandable given the lack of formal requirement for non-French EU citizens to register their residence in France in this way. Indeed, the official advice on the French government's public services website (still) states:*

*If you are European and come to work/ study/ retire [or be economically inactive] in France, you do not need a residence permit to live in France. However, you can request a residence permit.<sup>28</sup>*

Maggie, who had retired to the Lot two years previously, explained that the lack of any formal requirement introduced complications for those living in France who did not know how they might attest to their residence were they ever called upon to do so.

---

<sup>28</sup> For the original, see: <https://www.service-public.fr/particuliers/vosdroits/F22117>; translation by author.



*... the thing about not having to have anything like a carte de séjour is quite confusing actually, because we want to live in France, how do we establish the fact that we live here apart from making a tax declaration, and we can't even do that. We went to the tax office twice and they said oh no you can't do that until next year, and so we haven't actually told anybody ... So it's a bit disconcerting that you don't get something to say that you're a resident.*

What this also meant was that at the time of the Referendum, very few Britons living in France had current residence permits of any kind. It is also important to note that even when they did, it wasn't clear what status these would have after Brexit, or even whether they would remain valid given that they were granted on the basis of Britain's membership of the EU and their rights as EU citizens. Nevertheless, one action taken by some of those taking part in the research was to apply for their CdS or PR. Applications for these are made through the Préfecture and are subject to the provision of a dossier comprising documents attesting to how you meet the conditions for the right to live in France as an EU citizen.

Importantly, it was not until late 2018—several months after the publication of the draft Withdrawal Agreement in March that year—that campaign groups, local government officers, and British consular officials in France started to encourage British residents to apply for CdS and PR. The idea is that this would attest to their lawful residence and—if issued—the grounds on which they would be able to access the provisions and protections laid out in the Withdrawal Agreement. Later this year (2020), the French Government plans to launch an online portal where UK nationals can apply for a specific residence permit that attests to their residence in France before Brexit.<sup>29</sup> This will streamline the process and should remove some of the undue burden placed on local government officers who have been struggling to process the high volume of applications for CdS.

Another route that people were taking was to apply for naturalisation in France. Following the Referendum there was a significant increase in the number of British residents in France applying for naturalisation. This is understandable in the context presented above. It is important to note that France officially permits dual nationality. This means that British citizens applying for naturalisation as French do not need to renounce their British citizenship.

For those married to French nationals (for a minimum of four years), the route to naturalisation is by legal entitlement. For others, it is by decree, providing applicants meet the conditions of five years habitual and continuous residence, and are judged to be 'integrated' into French society. Participants' explanations for why they chose this action were complex, and included:

- to continue living in France on the same terms they currently enjoyed;
- to maintain their EU citizenship rights, notably Freedom of Movement;
- to demonstrate their commitment to France and participate in French society on a political and social level, including through voting and maintaining their right to local political office; and
- to secure their right to stay in France.

---

<sup>29</sup> See <http://invite.contacts-demarches.interieur.gouv.fr/BREXIT/Mise-a-jour-du-site-de-demande-de-titre-en-ligne-pour-les-ressortissants-britanniques-resident-en-France>

They explained that they had not done this before, because ‘when I’ve got all the rights enshrined in the EU treaties, it didn’t seem to be an issue’ (Cynthia, 40s, Gers), and because of this, it hadn’t seemed a priority in among the other demands of everyday life. Others were angry that it had come to this; they felt that Brexit forced them to apply for French citizenship as a way of making sure they were entitled to jobs and employment opportunities in France on the same terms as their French and other European peers.

For others, this was described as:

- making good on a long-term ambition;
- a way of remaining European or of becoming French—both of which were stated as a claim to identities rather than exclusively as nationalities;
- a way of distancing themselves from Britain and Britishness, with many of them claiming that were they required to cede their UK citizenship that they would do so;
- the only way to secure their futures given the turbulence about what Brexit might mean for their lives across a range of spheres; and
- an action undertaken because of their recognition that it was better to be a citizen in the place you lived than not.

In the context of the relaxed approach to the migration of European Citizens to France, signalled by the lack of compulsory requirements for them to register their presence, Brexit has been a steep learning curve for many Britons resident in France. It has also resulted in them turning attention to their relationships to Britain and Britishness, Europe and Europeanness.

It was also clear that before Brexit, many of them had not even been aware that it was possible to have dual nationality or had not even thought about it. Tamsin had been brought up and educated in France to MA Level and was now in her late 20s, unemployed and looking for work in Toulouse. As she explained:

*It was talking with my colleague so I started looking and found I can apply and have dual nationality ... It is just a security measure. I don’t want to get kicked out ... One thing I did read ... if two people go for the same job, one European or French and a British person, if they have exactly the same qualifications and experience both people would be perfectly fine for the job but they would have to choose the EU person rather than the British one ... So if it can penalise me on a professional basis then it is worrying.*

Indeed, those taking part in my original research, conducted in the early 2000s, had at that time explained to me their fear that if they were to apply for French citizenship, they might be required to surrender their British passports. While this indicated that they were ill-informed, more than anything it pointed to a continuing value placed on their Britishness, made material through their (then) maroon-coloured British passports. Indeed, it is notable that Spain, where nationality law prohibits dual nationality for most British nationals, has not seen a parallel rise in applications for citizenship. It seems then, that the idea of renouncing their status as UK nationals, of surrendering their British passports, has been a significant deterrent.

Other actions they undertook included applying for Irish citizenship—for those who had demonstrable Irish ancestry—and formalising their residence or relationship status (for example, through civil union (PACS)). For others, this meant changing their plans for short-term mobility (within Europe), conscious that they might need to demonstrate an unbroken term of residence in France.

What became clear was that these moves were largely about being able to stay put (at least for the foreseeable future). They were trying to ensure that they could continue living in France the way they had up until now. This at least promised some security within the context of considerable uncertainty and was telling of the gravity of the effects they felt Britain's withdrawal from the European Union might have on their lives.<sup>30</sup>

## Moving On

For a small number of those taking part, Brexit marked a moment when they re-evaluated whether to stay in France or move on. It is important to recognise here that for some, living in France had been 'for now' rather than 'forever', for a period in their life—ordinarily the first few years of retirement—the duration of a short-term employment contract or secondment. Over the duration of the research, I witnessed several people move on:

- a woman in her 30s working as an English teacher moved on to a job in Malaysia;
- a young family living in Toulouse returned to the UK when the initial employment contract came to an end, wanting to be closer to family with their young son;
- two of the retired couples I had known since the early 2000s moved back to homes they had maintained in the UK, citing ill health and wanting to be closer to family; and
- for a further couple, their planned emigration from France was because of worries they had about what Brexit would mean for their finances; at the time of the research they were waiting to sell their house in France so that they could buy a property close to one of their daughters in the UK or Ireland.

What became clear through these cases was that just as one factor cannot explain why people decide to migrate in the first place, multiple factors coalesced to bring about the decision to move on. With the exception of the last couple, for whom it had been a very difficult and upsetting decision to take—because of all the work they had put into transforming a plot of land into a home—while the timing of return or moving on might coincide with it, participants mostly made clear that their move had very little to do with Brexit.

---

<sup>30</sup> While I have focussed almost exclusively on how people maintain their residence, Brexit's impacts on people's lives are more far-reaching than this initial analysis can demonstrate. Through their work with British small business owners in France, Vincent Lagarde and Valentina Di Pietro offer another perspective, focusing on how these economic actors react and respond to Brexit's impact on their business. See Lagarde, V. and DiPietro, V., 2019. Brexit before Brexit. Consequences of Brexit's anticipations on British entrepreneurs in France, between 2016 and 2019. In Sacco, M. (ed.) *Brexit: A Way Forward*. Delaware: Vernon Press. p.29-78.

For many of those taking part in the research, it became clear that their decisions to take action, as identified in the previous section, were intended as a way of mitigating the uncertainties about their future that Brexit had introduced into their lives. In the absence of official advice about the routes they should take, they took matters into their own hands.

### **Uneven outcomes and the right to stay put**

For many of those taking part in the research, taking matters into their own hands gave them some reprieve from the uncertainty introduced into their lives by Brexit. Indeed, sharing the news that she had received her French citizenship after an 18-month process, Jane stressed 'we can now cope with Brexit'. Citizenship acquisition and successful applications for the CdS established their right to stay put even if these actions did not resolve all of their concerns about what Brexit would mean for their lives. Where becoming French meant that they retained their European Citizenship—and with it the right to Free Movement—the CdS or PR offered insurance that they had the right to remain in France; as yet, it remains to be seen whether UK nationals will have the right to Freedom of Movement following the transition period.

For others, taking matters into their own hands was far from plain sailing. This was particularly notable as people approached their prefectures to apply for residency permits (CdS or PR) before the citizens' rights negotiations were completed. The confusion that Brexit had generated appeared to be replicated among those who would process these applications. Those taking part in the research told me of their various experiences, notably, being turned away without these on the following grounds:

- that they did not need these as EU citizens as per the advice on the Public Services website;
- that they were/would be no longer EU citizens (after Brexit) and so these would not be valid at any rate; and
- that they did not meet the requirements to be issued with these.

To demonstrate how widespread this was, in October 2018 the European Citizens Action Service lodged a complaint with the European Commission about the failure of the French municipal authorities to issue residence documentation to EU citizens lawfully residing in France.

It was also clear that some CdS were issued with short time frames— the card can be issued for varying lengths of time, from 6 months to 5 years—and that those who thought that they should be eligible for PR were issued instead with CdS, which only ensured their residence for up to 5 years. What this points to is that residency permits were not providing the resolution people imagined they might, and in some cases were further exacerbating uncertainty.

Finally, there were some among the participants who were not well-positioned to secure their futures in this way. On 24 October 2018, *The Connexion*, an English-language newspaper popular with British citizens living in France reported on the case of a British widow who had been issued with an *Obligation de Quitter le Territoire Français* (OQTF). This notice to leave within 30 days was issued when her application for CdS was denied, a judgement that she had appealed. It was publicly reported that she was deemed to have insufficient resources to not be a burden on the state, and was thus not lawfully resident in France as a European Citizen. This was a situation replicated for Leigh, who was taking part in the research through the citizens'



panel. In January 2019, she wrote to the project team, explaining that she had been turned down for CdS twice, and was now fighting this in court with the support of a pro-bono lawyer.

As I have discussed elsewhere, the experience of being questioned about (or questioning for themselves) whether they meet the terms for lawful residence in France makes visible the highly differentiated life circumstances and experiences of these Britons.<sup>31</sup> Simply, Brexit has uneven outcomes and consequences for the lives of British citizens living in France that will, in time, play out not only in relation to their right to continued residence in France but also for the range of factors supporting their lives in France—for example, exportable benefits (including pensions), access to healthcare, taxation, continued Freedom of Movement and the exchange rate.<sup>32</sup>

As such, these initial examples portend what the fallout from Brexit may be in the future for some among this population.

### **Desperately seeking information**

Until now, I have focussed on individual actions. However, these rarely took place in a vacuum. It was clear from the outset that many of those taking part in the research struggled to evaluate what Brexit might mean for their lives in France and were looking for answers (even before there were any). However, it also became clear that the cacophony of voices about Brexit and the negotiations was confusing and difficult to navigate. My sense in speaking to people was that they were often unclear about where or to whom they could turn for advice and support. Further, many of them were struggling to sort through the volume of information about Brexit circulating through online news media and internet fora, to find trustworthy and reliable information that could help them address their specific concerns amongst the latest hot takes on the negotiations. It was particularly notable that the most vulnerable among them also demonstrated a lack of knowledge about how to access appropriate information and guidance. Indeed, among the more precariously positioned in my research, the tone of the interviews communicated a sense that they were holding back. Often, it was part way through the interview, when the tape went off, as they accompanied me to my car, or even later, via email, when they would reveal the full extent of their concerns in their questions to me about what they could do to relieve some of their uncertainties.

In the first instance, it was clear that knowledge (and, at times, misinformation) emerged organically through existing relationships between UK nationals on the ground. For example, small groups of UK nationals living in the Lot came together to support one another in their applications for citizenship; these were the grounds for sharing information and experience, helping one another to compile the necessary documents and to test one another on their knowledge of France in preparation for their interviews. These friendship networks pre-existed the Referendum, and Brexit became a significant topic of conversation within them. It was notable that, in the Lot, these face-to-face networks seemed to be the primary source of information about Brexit, their changing rights and entitlements, for those taking part in

---

<sup>31</sup> Benson, M. 2019. Brexit and the classed politics of bordering: the British in France and European belongings. *Sociology*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038519885300>.

<sup>32</sup> These uneven outcomes are not restricted to France. In a special bonus episode of the *Brexit Brits Abroad* podcast released in October 2019, we discuss the stratification of the British population living in Europe and how Brexit interplays with this. Available at: <https://brexitbritsabroad.libsyn.com/special-bonus-episode-brexit-bordering-and-the-british-in-europe>







the research. This was supplemented with information from the longstanding and popular English language newspaper *The Connexion*, which they accessed through both paper and online subscriptions. Some UK nationals organised local information evenings, to share their experiences with a larger number of their compatriots.

In Toulouse, where these face-to-face networks were less prominent and where there were higher numbers of people in dual national relationships, those taking part in the research told of their engagement with Facebook groups focused on becoming French citizens which included everything from advice drawn from personal experience, to listing the latest rendez-vous available in the prefecture. Online fora were often consulted instrumentally, sought out for the information they could provide about what they could and should do in consequence of Brexit. Importantly, and with very few exceptions, for most of those taking part in the research, engagement with these online spaces seemed fleeting and instrumental, as Cathy's quotation below illustrates.

*And I sort of went onto a couple of social media groups expat groups just to get an idea is there anything I should be doing or am I just an ostrich with my head in the sand "Now that I've got my Irish passport, oh I don't need to worry". Or should I actually be doing something else?*

The reliance on virtual and face-to-face social networks is understandable in the context of the diffuse and dispersed population of UK nationals and the relative absence of British community organisations. These networks and the information they were able to glean online stood in for the lack of detail provided in official communications from the UK or French governments about what Brexit might mean for their lives. The former was interpreted by many of those taking part as their government not caring sufficiently about their futures and lives.<sup>33</sup> It was not until late 2018 (2.5 years after the Brexit referendum) that the UK consular services put on an information evening in Cahors (Lot department prefecture). While the Foreign and Commonwealth Office had visited Toulouse in 2017, this was organised in a relatively last minute way, and many of those taking part in the research had not been aware that it was happening.

The shape of the networks between UK nationals living in France raises particular challenges for communicating and circulating reliable information to them. Brexit and the patchy receipt of information among them that I observed over the course of the project stands as testament to these challenges. Beyond this, however, it has left them with a sense that they are nobody's responsibility but their own.

### **Making sense of Brexit in and through social relationships**

For many of those taking part in the research, the way they felt about Brexit was (variously) mediated by social relationships both in the UK and France. Common narratives about their relationships with friends and family emerged in these accounts. Notably (and in line with those emerging in the British population at large) they discussed the family feuds sparked by Brexit; unique to these Britons were their accounts of the newly disclosed antagonisms among family members about their decision to live elsewhere in Europe and the family members and

---

<sup>33</sup> You can learn more about this in Episode 14 of the *Brexit Brits Abroad* podcast, in which the *Brexpats* project team reflect on the question, 'Who cares about UK citizens living in the EU27?'. Available at: <https://brexitbritsabroad.libsyn.com/ep019-who-cares-about-uk-citizens-living-in-the-eu27>



friends who thought that since they had ‘abandoned Britain’ they should have no say in its future. In some cases, this translated into an expectation from relatives that Brexit might mean that people return to the UK. What was clear was that these interactions about Brexit placed a significant strain on relationships, and became a space where those left in Britain could vent previously unspoken feelings about their relatives’ and friends’ migration to France.

Tamsin had been brought to France as a teenager; now in her 20s, she was looking for work in Toulouse, while her parents and younger siblings (who had been born in France) continued to live in a very remote rural area. She described the consequences of a family feud between her grandmother and parents, ‘We had a huge argument with my Nan ... But I was shocked ... I know it is my feeling, and my parents’, we do feel quite abandoned at the moment ...’. Differences of opinion rapidly escalated to become personal. Indeed, Val who had taken early retirement from her job as a teacher, and had now been living in the Lot for a few years explained a conversation with an old friend back in Britain,

*... she voted out and she’s very, gets very angry over it and early days we were discussing it but it got to the point where it was putting a strain on our friendship. I said something at one point and she said ‘oh well it’s nothing to do with you anyway you’re sitting out there in the sunshine while we’re all working here in the UK and why should you have any input into our decisions’ and things like that. So I said ‘I’ll accept that, fair enough if we don’t have to pay our taxes, because we’re still paying taxes into the UK.*

Hayley, who had moved to southwest France following the Referendum after she and her partner had lost their jobs in the UK; she described her late discovery that her family had voted to leave as she wrote to me in 2018,

*Recently I’ve been having quite an emotive internal conflict between feeling deliberately betrayed and/or accidentally forgotten about ... I’ve realised now that most of my family voted for Brexit and would do again, and the people that I know who voted remain also have little sympathy because essentially they’re bored of Brexit and after all I made the decision to live in France. I must add, I do feel grateful and privileged, I have my health, my French family and a lovely life overall, it could be a lot worse, nevertheless I’m still really negatively impacted by this whole thing and it’s not very easy to articulate these feelings neither.*

Their reflections on navigating Brexit with and in opposition to family members gave a sense of the shape and significance of transnational family practices within the lives of these British migrants, and how Brexit has intervened—positively and negatively—within these. Brexit was, and is, experienced relationally. They signal how Brexit has often been a deeply personal experience, where they had themselves been questioned (perhaps for the first time) by friends and family about their allegiance to Britain and the British.

However, it is also clear that these local networks provided space for making sense of Brexit on their own terms and through conversation (and conflict); as they described, these discussions could be cathartic or therapeutic. Indeed, the focus groups (with established groups of friends)

I conducted as part of the research demonstrated this clearly; they quickly became spaces where those participating could express their views on Brexit and what it had meant for their lives, and blow off steam while also projecting broader understandings of what Brexit might mean for Britain and the terms of their continued residence in France. Importantly, at times participants might contradict and challenge one another through their arguments. Within this staged setting, the discussions never escalated out of control.

The interviews made clear that among some groups of friends, discussions had become heated to the point where a tacit agreement was reached that they would no longer discuss Brexit. People were keen to reveal their chance encounter with a 'lone Brexiteer' in France at some social gathering or other, and the uncontrollable visceral reactions that these encounters had produced—including shouting, or leaving the event. Bridget, who expressed her passionate anti-Brexit sentiments in our interview, described her otherwise out-of-character response when faced with Leave voters at a local event in the Lot,

*... I mean they live in France but they voted Brexit, and ... I was so rude to this couple and it was so out of character and I felt afterwards that it was another person who was saying these things, I was so angry with them, I've never felt like that before, I can't remember ever feeling, with almost complete strangers that I was so angry with what they'd done.*

Importantly, where the focus groups were with people who already had close social relationships, these other encounters were ordinarily with people who they had not previously met or did not know very well. It is perhaps unsurprising that the proximity of these social relationships influenced their preparedness to work through differences of opinion about Brexit or find other ways of managing these differences of opinion, signalling an awareness of the very different stakes of these relationships. In recalling such encounters, those taking part in the research often revealed how deeply they had felt the outcome of the referendum.

A final dimension to the consideration of how Brexit is experienced in and through relationships, is how their concerns about Brexit turned towards what this would mean for their social relationships with their neighbours. Indeed, among those living in the Lot and taking part in the research, a common 'morning-after-the-referendum' concern was what their French neighbours would think of Britain's decision to leave the UK and whether this would translate into questions about whether Britons had the right to live in France? For the most part, these concerns were put to rest immediately. They told of their chance encounters with their neighbours, and the commiserations and shared sense of incredulity that reassured them that even in light of Brexit their contributions—to the local economy, to the community—were a valued part of daily life in this sparsely populated part of the French countryside. They told me of the matter-of-fact way that their French neighbours came up with 'solutions' to ensure their continued residence in France—'Well, you're just going to take French citizenship aren't you?' The tone of these conversations as much as the content was a consolation to them at a time when they felt that their futures were plunged into uncertainty.

What this section has demonstrated, albeit briefly, are the ways in which Brexit is experienced and interpreted in and through social relations, with friends and family in the UK and with other Britons living in France, but also with their French friends and neighbours.

## Brexit and claims to identity and belonging<sup>34</sup>

Beyond the concerns about what Brexit would mean for their legal status and the other structures that supported their lives in France, it was clear that this had raised questions for them about their place in the world. It was particularly notable in the way they discussed their relationship to Britain and Britishness, but also to Europe and Europeaness.<sup>35</sup> Our discussions made visible the values they associated with being British, how they understood what it meant to European, and what Brexit had done to the shape of these understandings.<sup>36</sup>

However, they also expressed strong feelings for and about Britain. Their sentiments about Britain included the deep patriotism of Susan, a self-avowed royalist and ‘proud Englishwoman’, who had voted against the UK remaining in the European Community and Common Market in 1975 and expressed her support for Britain leaving the EU in the 2016 Referendum (even though she could not vote):

*English people here, I think it's terrible, "I'm thinking of taking French citizenship", I think that's ... I'm loyal to my country and I'm a loyal person, I wouldn't give up my citizenship. We've got to establish ourselves, with our trade and other countries. But we can do it, god almighty we're British of course we can do it. I'm very, very patriotic.*

What is important here is how she interprets other people's ambitions to apply for French citizenship; adamant that she would never go down this route, she reveals her belief—albeit supported by an inaccurate understanding that applying for French citizenship means denouncing British citizenship—that her allegiance lay with the country of her birth. She was also clear that if Brexit meant she could no longer live in France, even after 20+ years there, she would happily return to South London.

As Susan's account illustrates, for those in favour of Britain's exit from the European Union, the sense of confidence in Britain's future, its ability to manage its own affairs going forward were passionately conveyed. But for those who had come out strongly against Brexit, Britain was presented as insular, not the country they had left, as intolerant and xenophobic. Many of

<sup>34</sup> Belonging has been a central theme of my research with British citizens living in France, where I consider not only how this is experienced through national and European belongings, but also at local and transnational scales. See for example, Benson, M. (2016) 'Deconstructing Belonging in Lifestyle Migration: Tracking the Emotional Negotiations of the British in Rural France', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 19(5): 481-494. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549416631554>; Benson, M. (2010) 'We're not Expats; we are not Migrants; we are Sautiaçoise: Laying Claim to Belonging in Rural France', in Bonisch-Brednich, B. and Trundle, C. (eds) *Local Lives: Migration and the Micro-politics of Place*. Farnham: Ashgate. pp. 67-84.

<sup>35</sup> These were common themes across the project as a whole. You can learn more about this in several episodes of the *Brexit Brits Abroad* podcast. We particularly recommend Episode 36, which sees the project team talk through what Britishness means to Britons living in the EU-27 in Brexit times. Available at: <https://brexitbritsabroad.libsyn.com/ep036-what-does-britishness-mean-to-britons-living-in-the-eu-27-in-brexit-times>.

<sup>36</sup> These discussions of the relationship between being British and being European need to be placed in context of how Britons living in France previously related to their European citizenship. This is at the core of Fiona Ferbrache's research with British citizens living in France. See for example Ferbrache, F. and Yarwood, R., 2015. Britons abroad or European citizens? The negotiation of (trans) national space and citizenship by British migrants in France. *Geoforum*, 62, pp.73-83; Ferbrache, F., 2019. Acts of European citizenship: How Britons resident in France have been negotiating post-Brexit futures. *Geography*, 104(2).

those I spoke to described how they did not recognise Britain any longer, and felt ashamed to call themselves British, drawing instead on regional and local identities (e.g. Scottish, Welsh, Lancastrian, from Yorkshire). Importantly, such responses similarly reveal deep feelings for and about Britain, the ‘bad Britain’ discourse emerging in response to Brexit coming out because of—rather than in spite of—these.<sup>37</sup> Within the wider context in which they felt questioned about their allegiance to Britain, these responses gain greater significance. Kate, who in her 40s had been living and working in France for 15 years, was passionately against Brexit but yet stressed that she would never be French (even if she applied for French citizenship, was particularly clear on the question of her relationship to Britain and Britishness.

*I realise how much I cared about my country. I didn't realise how proud, yeah, that's what going abroad does for you actually ... It didn't mean anything to me when I lived there ... Before [the referendum], I would have said ... we're very open-minded, I would say we're very friendly, I like the sense of humour that the English have that you really see is missing here ... After the referendum ... when people check what nationality I am now I would say, yeah, I still call myself English, and I would say "Yeah, sorry about that", I feel like I need to apologise for my country's complete stupidity ... I don't want any association with that actually. I'm a European now.*

Her account also demonstrates a broader theme that emerged through the research with Britons living in France, one in which Brexit had remade Britain as a place they no longer knew or recognised, with the racism and xenophobia at the heart of the Referendum campaigns a significant dimension of this. Their experiences in Britain since the Referendum confirmed this. Indeed, an account that came up time and again in interviews with the Britons living in the Lot was of receiving abuse and of road rage directed towards them when driving their cars with French licence plates on British roads. The story is clearly allegorical. Within the broader context where their allegiances are being questioned, it communicates their ambivalence about Britishness, their sense that Britain has become unfamiliar to them, as well as the concern that they are no longer recognisable to their compatriots as British.

Before the referendum, for the most part, for Britons resident in France the question of whether they were British had never crossed their minds. More precisely, they had never found their national identity challenged or questioned. Brexit changed all of that. While one response to this might be to eschew Britishness as a sense of identity and belonging, their accounts made clear how this had made them re-evaluate their relations to Britain and Britishness, and what it meant to be British in Europe.

Before Brexit, it was common for British citizens living in France to talk about how they were different from other British citizens living abroad. Notably, they would draw on stereotypes of the British in Spain—stereotypes that saw them as failing to integrate, as living in ‘little England’—as a way to disassociate themselves from negative connotations of the ‘British

---

<sup>37</sup> For more about how Brexit interplays with negative understandings of Britain among British citizens living in the EU-27, listen to Episode 30 of the *Brexit Brits Abroad* podcast, where guest Dr. Katie Higgins discusses the findings of her survey research about the outcome of the Brexit referendum with Britons living in the EU27, available at: <http://brexitbritsabroad.libsyn.com/website/ep030-bad-britain-and-the-bad-british-in-responses-of-british-citizens-in-the-eu27-to-brexit-0>. See also her published research: Wright Higgins, A. 2018 National belonging post-referendum: Britons living in other EU Member States respond to “Brexit”. *Area*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12472>



abroad', describing their efforts to become part of and contribute to the local community, to speak French. Following the Referendum, their sense of what it meant to be British in France took a new shape: their understandings of themselves as British were shaped also by their understanding of their relationship to Europe and Europeanness. Further context to this is the prior ambivalence towards Europe and European identities documented in the case of British citizens living in the EU27. Europe became ballast for their identities; for some it became inseparable from their understanding of what it meant to be British, for others, it was an identity and claim to belong that surpassed what they saw as an increasingly inward looking British identity.

What becomes clear is that Brexit marks a moment where British populations living elsewhere in France are re-evaluating their relationship with Britain, and with Europe, what this means for how they understand who they are and their relationships with friends and family.

## Conclusion

The research findings laid out in this report demonstrate that the way in which Brexit is lived and experienced by British citizens living in France is shaped by broader historical and material conditions, personal circumstances and biographies. As I have outlined, historical factors support British emigration and settlement elsewhere in the world. Simply, British passport holders can cross borders with relative ease. Within the context of Europe, Freedom of Movement directives have further institutionalised the relative privilege of UK nationals signified by this ease. Such relative privilege has meant that a broad cross-section of the British population have been able to cross borders and settle in other parts of the world for a variety of reasons. It is also clear that their experiences of Brexit have instilled in them a sense that at least when it comes to the UK government, Britons living in the EU-27 have been 'out of sight, out of mind'.

Further, as I have laid out above, British migration to France is best characterised as self-initiated, whether this is for work, lifestyle or otherwise. This mirrors the shape of British tourism to France, which is similarly individualised. What this means in practice is that migration and the establishment of lives in France—while loosely supported by relevant legal structures—have largely been in the hands of individuals. Their migration narratives often revealed how this movement across borders resolved other challenges and issues they were facing in their lives. For the large part, British citizens living in France are adept at taking matters into their own hands; their migration is a case in point. Fast forward to Brexit and the profound and prolonged uncertainties that this has introduced for many of them about their futures, it is perhaps unsurprising that many of them are seeking their own solutions.

The lack of formal implementation of Freedom of Movement directives to judge the rights of EU citizens to settle in France has also been significant in shaping the way that many Britons living in France have experienced the Brexit negotiations. Similarly, the dispersal of this population has presented significant challenges to the circulation of reliable information. This becomes particularly visible in the extent degree of the misinformation and confusion communicated to me through my interviews.

Beyond these conditions, the report has also made clear how the personal circumstances of British citizens living in France equip them variously to respond to the challenges that Brexit presents to their desires to secure their future lives in France. Indeed, it is only in taking together the historical and material conditions, personal circumstances and biographies (and the contingencies that these introduce into people's lives) that the uneven outcomes of Brexit can be revealed and understood. Simply, for some there is more at stake in Brexit than for others. Perhaps unsurprisingly, those already precariously positioned along known axes of social inequality—notably, gender, disability, race, class, age (often at their intersections)—are made more vulnerable through Brexit.<sup>38</sup>

This is the state-of-play at the end of the Brexit negotiations, at the point at which the UK has formally left the EU, and as the terms relating to citizens' rights laid out in the Withdrawal Agreement start to be implemented. Only time will tell the full impact of Brexit on the lives of the Britons already resident in France, and on the future of British migration to France.

---

<sup>38</sup> For more on how vulnerability has been exacerbated by Brexit in the case of British citizens living in Spain see Miller, R. G., 2019. (Un) settling home during the Brexit process. *Population, Space and Place* 25(1), p.e2203. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2203>

## Recommendations

- The UK Government should take proactive steps to provide better support to UK nationals living in France (and in other overseas countries), and counter their prevailing impression of being 'out of sight, out of mind' - both during Brexit, and beyond. This should include, reconsidering the role of the Foreign and Commonwealth office in supporting these emigrants and rethinking the services and provisions on offer through consular services, perhaps through the development of one-stop shops or surgeries.
- We recommend that the UK Government take steps to build a rigorous knowledge base about UK nationals living in France and elsewhere in the EU that can inform and drive understandings of the various meanings of Brexit for these Britons. This needs to account for the scale of this population, its demographic diversity, and its geographical spread. Knowledge exchange with the academic experts who have been systematically collecting evidence about what Brexit means for this population, tracing how this varies and is unevenly experienced would be a good first step in developing these understandings. There is an urgent need to recognise that particular groups of UK nationals living in France have already faced disproportionate challenges, and therefore require additional support in securing their future lives in France.
- Further, recognising the close connections that these Britons living in France maintain to the UK, members of the UK Government should reconsider the current disenfranchisement of UK nationals living overseas after 15 years abroad, and deliver the Conservative manifesto promise to extend lifetime enfranchisement to Britain's emigrants.
- Both the UK and French governments need to develop better strategies for distributing relevant knowledge and information to UK nationals living in France. This needs to rest on intelligence about the different ways that knowledge filters to individuals and communities and that recognises what some routes might shut down (as well as what they might open up).
- We also recommend that the UK and EU negotiators working on the terms of the UK's future relationship with the EU should take heed of the persistent concerns of UK nationals living in France about the removal of their right to Freedom of Movement within Europe and consider the options for maintaining this through the terms of the future economic relationship. Within the EU, the continued value of EU citizenship rights and the strength of the European identities of UK nationals living in the EU27 should inform ongoing conversations within the European Union, its institutions and member states concerned with transforming or extending EU citizenship (e.g. calls for Associate EU citizenship).

## About the author

Dr Michaela Benson is Reader in Sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London. From 2017-19, she was the Principal Investigator of the 'BrExpats; freedom of movement, citizenship, and Brexit in the lives of Britons resident in the EU-27' 'BrExpats: freedom of movement, citizenship, and Brexit in the lives of Britons resident in the EU-27', a longitudinal research project which examined Brexit and its impacts for the 1.2 million Britons resident in the EU-27 funded by the ESRC through the UK in a Changing Europe Initiative. Michaela is a leading academic authority on contemporary British emigration, an area she has been researching since the early 2000s. Her early research on British migration to rural France resulted in the publication of *The British in Rural France* (Manchester University Press, 2011), a book subsequently shortlisted for the British Sociological Association's Philip Abrams Memorial Prize (2012) and numerous academic journal articles. More recently, she has conducted research into the phenomenon of North American migration to Panama, which led to her collaboration with Karen O'Reilly for the book *Lifestyle Migration and Colonial Traces in Malaysia and Panama* (Palgrave, 2018).



The *BrExpats* research project brought her back to southwest France, where she conducted the indepth fieldwork UK nationals living in France. She also led the research with UK nationals in Ireland, and all public engagement and knowledge exchange activities undertaken by the research team. A committed public social science communicator, she is the host of the Brexit Brits Abroad podcast which has been running fortnightly since May 2017. She is currently a recipient of the British Academy's Mid- Career Fellowship, for the project *Britain and its overseas citizens: from decolonisation to Brexit*.

## Acknowledgements

This report was written on the basis of research conducted for the '*BrExpats: freedom of movement, citizenship, and Brexit in the lives of Britons living in the EU-27*' project, led by Dr Michaela Benson. It was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council through their UK in a changing Europe initiative (Grant Number ES/R000875/1).

For their insights, comments, and recommendations, the author thanks the other members of the project team, Katherine Collins, Mike Danby, Chantelle Lewis and Karen O'Reilly, as well as fellow researchers working on Brexit and British citizens living in France Vincent LaGarde and Fiona Ferbrache. The author also thanks Sue Baxter, Brian and Mary Lord, and Rob and Kim Harvey, and Liv Rowland for their support on the ground in France, and members of the project's International Advisory Board Aliyyah Ahad, Meghan Benton, Maria Casado-Diaz, Laura Lopez, Suzanna McAllister, Jennie Rhodes and Debbie Williams. Finally, the author thanks the many British citizens living in France who, in taking part in the research contributed valuable insights and perspectives that enriched the research.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit:  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

A full text PDF of this document is available for free download from:  
<https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.00028222>

Suggested citation:  
Benson, Michaela. 2020. Brexit and the British in France. Project Report. Goldsmiths, London.

For further information get in touch with the *BrExpats* research team at:  
[contact@brexitbritsabroad.org](mailto:contact@brexitbritsabroad.org)