



**European
Movement**
United Kingdom

Freedom to prosper:

**British business and the
case for the single market**

Contents

1	Foreword	5
2	Introduction:	
	The UK and the single market today	7
3	Understanding the single market	9
4	The case for the single market and freedom of movement	10
5	Six years without access: The UK's experience	13
6	Voices of UK businesses	16
7	Our recommendations	40
8	References	42

1 Foreword

by Sir Nick Harvey
CEO, European Movement UK

Departure from the European Union and its single market have left a deep imprint on the national conversation. Yet today the mood in the country has shifted. Many people feel the debate itself has been exhausted. Businesses, workers and communities are now less interested in relitigating the past and more focused on a pressing question: *how do we deliver economic growth and prosperity in the years ahead?*

This report arrives at a crucial moment in this discussion.

The United Kingdom is emerging from a period defined not only by Brexit but also by the COVID-19 pandemic, global supply chain disruption and a prolonged cost-of-living crisis. Businesses across the country are looking for stability, access to markets and the ability to compete in an increasingly interconnected global economy.

What this report demonstrates clearly is that many of the barriers facing British businesses today stem from the loss of frictionless access to the European single market. While some tariff-free trade remains in place under the current arrangements, companies are now navigating customs paperwork, regulatory duplication and restrictions on labour mobility that simply did not exist before 2020. For many firms, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises, these additional frictions translate directly into higher costs, reduced competitiveness and lost opportunities.

Perhaps the most powerful aspect of this report is that it allows businesses themselves to speak. From manufacturers and exporters to educators, freelancers and cultural organisations, the case studies presented here illustrate how changes to the UK-EU relationship are affecting real people running real businesses. These are not abstract statistics repeated by both sides of the argument; they are the real experiences of entrepreneurs who have had to restructure supply chains, absorb new administrative costs or reduce their presence in European markets simply to continue operating.

Companies across the country have worked hard to adjust to the new trading environment. However, resilience should not be mistaken for satisfaction.

The central argument of this report is therefore straightforward. If the United Kingdom is serious about boosting productivity, supporting SMEs and expanding exports, it must consider how its relationship with Europe can better support those goals.



The European single market remains the world's largest integrated trading area, connecting hundreds of millions of consumers and enabling the free movement of goods, services, capital and people. Re-establishing closer economic integration with Europe would reduce trade frictions, improve supply chain resilience and give British businesses the scale they need to compete globally.

This report does not argue for reopening the political battles of the past. Instead, it offers a pragmatic and forward-looking perspective grounded in economic evidence and business experience.

The opportunity before policymakers is significant. By listening to the voices of British businesses and by pursuing a more ambitious economic partnership with Europe, the UK can move beyond the constraints of the past decade and towards a more confident and prosperous future.

Sir Nick Harvey
CEO, European Movement UK



2 Introduction:

The UK and the single market today

The next decade of debate

The United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union and with it the single market and customs union has been the subject of a decade-long national debate. Parliamentary deadlock in the UK and the subsequent General Election in 2019 left the British public fatigued by the European question. A study by the London School of Economics from November 2025 found a general downward trend of "EU" and "Brexit" related news stories in the British Press. This was supported by focus group feedback that the public *"don't want another five years of the only thing we talk about being Brexit"* (LSE, 2025).

While much of the British public wishes to move on from Brexit, there is a looming demand for economic improvement in a post-Brexit, post-COVID and post-cost-of-living crisis world. Research from the Good Growth Foundation describes the trend as the *"Growth Gap"* – the disconnect between how politicians in the UK express economic success and how the British public experiences it (Good Growth Foundation, 2025).

Their findings suggest that the public sees economic growth in four ways. Firstly, they interact with the economy through their ability to afford essential goods and services. Secondly, the public understands growth as a *"means to an end"*, connecting growth with *"improvements in healthcare, education and job training"* rather than *"abstract discussions about GDP"*. Thirdly, respondents noted the need



for tangible benefits of growth predominantly through lower costs, better wages or improved services rather than superficial changes or investment in the public realm. Finally, the Good Growth Foundation reported that “50% of the British public want a government that takes an active role in driving economic prosperity”, of which “long-term stability” is key (Praful Nargund, 2025).

50% of the British public want a government that takes an active role in driving economic prosperity

The demand for growth and long-term strategy comes at a time when the economic damage of the UK leaving the EU’s single market and customs union is clear.

and

“Before the referendum, UK GDP per capita grew at broadly the same pace as the comparison group (other EU nations). After 2016, the lines diverge. By the year to 2025 Q1, UK GDP per head had grown 6-10% less than in comparable economies, and only about 4% in absolute terms over the whole period” (UK in a Changing Europe, 2025).

Almost all economists agree that leaving the single market has made the UK significantly poorer. Most estimate that UK GDP per capita is between 4% and 8% lower than it would be if we had stayed in.



3 Understanding the single market

What is the single market

The European Union's single market, sometimes referred to as the "internal market" was officially established in 1993 to break down the barriers of trade between members of the EU. It means that people, goods, capital and services can move around the EU as if it was one country. EU citizens can work, live, study, holiday, and retire freely anywhere across the EU. While some countries outside the EU have limited access to the EU's single market, they do not enjoy all the benefits as a full member.

The single market has four freedoms:

People

Over 460 million people have the freedom to work in another member state of the EU (as well as Iceland, Norway, Liechtenstein, and Switzerland) without a work permit. Alongside the right to work, countries in the single market also mutually recognise qualifications, making it easier for people working in professional service industries to offer their services across member states. People are also free to move their families to their country of employment, to study, or to retire in another member state with access to education and healthcare.



Goods

By removing barriers to trade like customs duties, tariffs or quotas and harmonising product standards, it enables the free movement of goods or products across member states. It keeps standards and safety consistent and removes the need to modify products for each country.



Services

The freedom for businesses and customers to access services across member states. This means that people can access key services like banking, insurance, transport, professional services and telecommunications without discrimination. It also allows businesses to set up permanent operations in another EU country without burdensome regulations and procedures but also allows businesses to offer their services to other EU countries without being based there.



Capital

This allows for the free movement of money, investments and assets across the EU and states with access to the single market. For individuals, this means they can buy property in another EU country and set up bank accounts.



4 The case for the single market and freedom of movement

According to the European Union's own figures, the single market has raised the EU GDP by 3-4% and created 3.6million jobs. The EU now totals a GDP of €18 trillion, making it the world's second-largest economy and the world's largest single market area (European Union, 2026).



While the macroeconomic benefits of the single market are clearly established, the human story shows the real freedoms offered to the people of the EU. 17 million people live in an EU country other than their own and there are 1.8 million cross-border workers. It fosters trade between EU nations. Since the single market was established, intra-EU trade in goods has increased from €671 billion in 1993 to €4,135 billion in 2023. Furthermore, export of services between EU states and states with access to the single market has increased from €728 billion in 2010 to €1,361 billion in 2022. It benefits 32 million businesses in the EU, including small and medium enterprises, which employ over 100 million people in the EU (Consilium Europa, 2024).

For a country like the UK, the single market represents not only an economic asset but a strategic opportunity. As a highly service-oriented economy, where services account for around 80% of GDP, the UK stands to benefit significantly from frictionless access to a market of over 460 million consumers. The single market reduces non-tariff barriers, harmonises standards, and enables mutual recognition of qualifications, all of which are particularly advantageous for key British industries such as financial services, legal services, higher education, pharmaceuticals, advanced manufacturing, and the creative sector.

For small and medium-sized enterprises, easier export procedures and regulatory alignment lower the cost and complexity of selling into Europe, supporting innovation and growth. Moreover, participation in an integrated market strengthens supply chain resilience, attracts foreign direct investment from firms seeking a gateway to Europe, and enhances labour mobility, allowing businesses to access skills while giving citizens wider professional opportunities. In an increasingly competitive global economy shaped by large trading blocs, alignment with the world's largest single market would provide the UK with scale, stability, and influence that amplify its economic potential.

The case for freedom of movement

The case for the single market cannot be made without understanding the case for freedom of movement. The economic case for freedom of movement, particularly in the context of joining the single market, rests on a simple but powerful principle: labour mobility makes markets more efficient. Just as the free movement of goods,

services and capital allows resources to flow to where they are most productive, the free movement of people ensures that skills, talent and labour can respond dynamically to demand.

In a modern, integrated economy, restricting labour mobility while seeking the benefits of full market access creates friction. Freedom of movement is therefore not an ideological add-on to the single market; it is one of its core economic foundations.

For a country like the UK, with persistent labour shortages in sectors ranging from healthcare and social care to hospitality, construction, agriculture and advanced manufacturing, freedom of movement offers a flexible mechanism to address gaps quickly and efficiently.

Integrated supply chains depend not only on seamless customs procedures but also on the ability of firms to deploy staff across borders. Financial services firms require mobility for specialists and compliance professionals; technology companies rely on highly skilled programmers and engineers; universities depend on academic exchange; and manufacturing firms often rotate managers and technicians between facilities. Freedom of movement reduces administrative costs, visa delays and regulatory uncertainty, allowing firms to operate as if across one domestic market rather than multiple fragmented jurisdictions. This improves

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productivity and strengthens competitiveness.

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which form the backbone of the UK economy, also benefit disproportionately from simplified mobility rules. Large multinationals can absorb the legal and bureaucratic costs of complex



immigration systems; smaller firms cannot. A predictable, rights-based system of movement lowers barriers to entry into European markets, enabling SMEs to scale up, collaborate and innovate. It also facilitates entrepreneurship, as individuals are more likely to start businesses when they can move freely to pursue opportunities.

Ultimately, joining the single market without embracing freedom of movement would mean accepting a partial integration that constrains its full economic logic. Labour mobility enhances productivity, supports fiscal sustainability, enables business flexibility and expands opportunity for citizens. For many of us advocating for a future in which the United Kingdom is back at the heart of Europe, freedom of movement is fundamental to our social values. But perhaps more critically it is an economic asset that reinforces the advantages of single market participation.

5 Six years without access:

The UK's experience

The United Kingdom left the single market in 2020 following 4 years of negotiations after the 2016 referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union. In that time, the European Movement has conducted a series of business impact surveys. Over 3,000 businesses and individuals took part in our quantitative assessments.

Even before the United Kingdom left the single market, UK businesses were citing impacts with the loss of contracts and tougher procurement rules coming into force as early as 2016 in anticipation of the UK leaving the EU.

Trade frictions and regulatory barriers

Leaving the single market has introduced measurable trade frictions and regulatory barriers that have reshaped the UK's economic relationship with its largest trading partner. While tariff-free trade in goods continues under the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, the reintroduction of customs declarations, rules of origin requirements, regulatory checks and border formalities has increased the cost and complexity of cross-border commerce.

The impact is especially visible in sectors dependent on integrated European supply chains. Manufacturers now face additional paperwork, conformity assessments and potential delays at the border, reducing the efficiency of just-in-time production



models. Agri-food exporters encounter sanitary and phytosanitary checks that were previously unnecessary, adding administrative burdens and, in some cases, discouraging smaller exporters from serving EU markets altogether.

Services trade, a core strength of the UK economy, has also faced new constraints:

the loss of automatic mutual recognition of professional qualifications and the end of passporting rights in financial services have limited market access and required firms to establish subsidiaries within the EU.

Regulatory divergence, even where modest, creates uncertainty for businesses operating across both jurisdictions. Firms must increasingly navigate dual compliance systems, raising operational costs and complicating long-term investment decisions.

Supply chains and competitiveness

For decades, manufacturers, retailers and agri-food producers operated within frictionless cross-border networks, where components, raw materials and finished goods moved seamlessly between the UK and EU member states. The introduction of customs checks, rules of origin requirements and regulatory controls has disrupted this model, increasing lead times and administrative costs.

For some, even minor border delays can require higher inventory holdings, raising costs and reducing efficiency. Some firms have responded by restructuring logistics networks, shifting warehousing to the EU, or reconsidering investment decisions altogether. In certain cases, multinational companies have chosen to consolidate operations within the single market to avoid ongoing complexity.

These adjustments affect competitiveness. Higher transaction costs reduce profit margins and weaken the UK's attractiveness as a base for export-oriented investment. While businesses have shown resilience and adaptability, the cumulative effect of added bureaucracy and uncertainty places UK firms at a relative disadvantage compared to competitors operating entirely within the single market.

Impact on SMEs and exporters

Leaving the single market has had a disproportionate impact on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Unlike large multinational corporations, which often possess the legal teams, compliance departments and financial buffers necessary to absorb new administrative burdens, SMEs operate with tighter margins and more limited capacity. The introduction of customs declarations, VAT changes, export health certificates and rules of origin requirements has increased both the direct costs and the complexity of trading with the EU.

For many smaller firms, the single market previously provided a straightforward route to scale up their business. Exporting to the EU was administratively comparable to selling domestically. That simplicity has been replaced with paperwork, potential delays and uncertainty over regulatory compliance. Some SMEs have reduced the range of products they export, paused EU sales altogether, or shifted focus to domestic markets to avoid the bureaucratic burden.

Service-based SMEs have also faced challenges, including the loss of automatic recognition of professional qualifications and restrictions on short-term business travel. These barriers can deter smaller firms from pursuing contracts abroad.

Labour shortages and mobility constraints

The end of freedom of movement replaced a flexible, demand-led system with a points-based immigration framework. While this approach prioritises skills and salary thresholds, it has reduced the ease and speed with which employers can recruit from a nearby and previously integrated labour market.

Industries such as social care, hospitality, agriculture, food processing and logistics have been particularly affected. Many of these sectors relied on a steady inflow of EU workers to fill roles that are essential but often lower-paid or seasonal.

The new system introduces sponsorship costs, visa fees and administrative requirements that can be prohibitive for smaller employers, while salary thresholds may not reflect market realities in certain occupations. As a result, vacancies have remained elevated in some areas, contributing to upward wage pressures, service constraints and reduced output.

Higher transaction costs reduce profit margins and weaken the UK's attractiveness




6 Voices of UK Businesses

Introduction

Why business voices matter

Business owners are the backbone of the UK economy because they represent the part of society most directly involved in trade, employment, investment and economic stability. In 2025 SME's made up 99.9% of the total business population in the UK (House of Commons Library, 2025). It is, arguably, small and medium size businesses who have been hardest by Brexit. This is why we want to showcase their voices in this report. We want to highlight the challenges businesses have had to overcome to survive in this post-Brexit reality and put forward their recommendations for change.



In 2025 SME's made up 99.9% of the total business population in the UK

Methodology and selection

Businesses featured in this report were identified primarily through organic engagement channels coordinated by European Movement UK (EMUK). These included responses to online surveys, referrals from EMUK members and supporters, and replies from prominent business representatives whom we approached directly.

To ensure a robust assessment of Brexit's impact on UK businesses, it was essential to capture perspectives from a diverse range of sectors and regions. We therefore conducted interviews with business owners and representatives from manufacturing, the creative industries, education, charities, freelance professions, and other fields. Across sectors, participants consistently described the challenges of navigating the uncertainty and regulatory changes following the UK's departure from the European Union in 2020.

Following initial expressions of interest, interviews were conducted online, providing participants with the opportunity to share detailed accounts of their experiences. Interviewees were first asked to outline how their organisations operated prior to Brexit, before describing the adjustments required in its aftermath. Finally, each participant was invited to identify up to three policy measures they would recommend the UK Government implement in response to the issues raised.

Anette Holt Photography

Name: Anette Schweizer

Location: Newark, Nottinghamshire

Industry: Arts

About my business: I am a freelance UK based photographer, selling abstract art through galleries in the UK and previously in my native Germany.

My Brexit Story: Before Brexit, displaying and selling my art in galleries in Europe was easy to arrange, with little to no barriers and endless opportunities. However, since Brexit, to sell my art and make a profit I would have to charge a significantly higher price due to import taxes. I also sell pictures through my website and when a European customer asks for prices it is impossible for me to give an exact figure because I cannot guarantee how much the import tax will be, resulting in losing the customer. In addition, sending artwork through customs is extremely challenging and totally confusing.

The other post-Brexit reality is that working with EU galleries is no longer worth the time or risk. Transport costs, increased taxes, and additional paperwork involved with exhibiting in a European gallery are extraordinary, with all these upfront costs and risks falling onto me. As the artist I have to cover all the associated costs without any guarantee of selling any of my art. This means that my customer base has gone from 500 million people in Europe to only 60 million people living in the UK, which is a huge loss for all independent artists.

What I want to see change: Joining the single market and customs union is a no brainer with immense benefits and opportunities for businesses of all sizes. Furthermore, I would like to see a greater focus on support for smaller businesses who often feel forgotten and left behind. This is especially important where businesses like mine have had their potential growth and customer bases slashed. Finally, freedom of movement between the UK and Europe is so important not only for business but for individual relationships and sharing culture.



Photo credit:
Anette Schweizer,
ANETTE HOLT
PHOTOGRAPHY
- Anette Holt
Photography



Anglesey Sea Salt Co. Ltd

Name: Alison Lea-Wilson MBE – Managing Director

Location: Brynsiencyn, Anglesey, Wales

Industry: Food and distribution



About My Business: My husband and I started Anglesey Sea Salt Co Ltd in 1996 growing the business in the UK and then eventually exporting worldwide in 2009. Our award-winning Halen Mon Sea salt can be found in more than 22 countries across the globe as well as on the tables of some of the world's top restaurants. We also have a sea salt factory shop in Anglesey, which we hope is full of beautiful and delicious things.

My Brexit Story: Since Brexit, trading with our largest export markets – Italy and Spain – has become so much harder. Before Brexit, it used to take under a week to export one pallet of our products from Brynsiencyn to Bologna, but now it takes up to three months. The delays are largely due to excessive paperwork. Rather than following the EU rules across all European countries, we now must liaise with each country individually. For example, if one of our pallets to Bologna travels through multiple countries it has to go through the customs checks for each of those countries, and if they don't like it, the pallet gets held in customs. We are very much at the whim of whoever receives the pallet. For some products, we even need a vet to come and inspect them before they can be exported. As a result of Brexit and the difficulties we face trading with the EU, the company lost four major EU distributors, sadly this translates to a loss of customers.

What I want to see change: The long-term goal would ultimately be to rejoin the EU but, thinking more of the immediate future, a suitable trade agreement in place would make all the difference to companies like mine.

Apparel Studio

Name: Mike Donovan at Apparel Studio Stockport

Location: Unit e6, Enterprise Centre Two, Ford St, Stockport SK3 0BT

Industry: Sport; Screen Printing; Manufacturing

About My Business: Apparel Studio is a quality custom sport merchandise design, screen print & supply company based in Stockport. We supply professional sports clubs with bespoke merchandise across Europe.

My Brexit Story: My business had substantial success during our initial years of trading but as soon as the referendum vote happened in 2016 our earnings were cut in half almost overnight. The 12% tariffs on all imports and exports drastically decreased our profits which meant we had to change our business model and move our manufacturing to countries like Turkey. Unfortunately, this impacted the quality of our products, and we brought our manufacturing back into Europe where we are at the complete mercy of the tariffs. We have been struggling for 7 years now and because of Brexit the UK has been paying tariffs since 2020. People often say to just 'move on' from Brexit, but that's impossible when businesses like mine feel the negative impacts on a weekly basis.

What I want to see change: Simply put, we need access to the customs union and the single market so that our business can thrive again.





Banyoles Language School

Name: Joe Willcox

Location: Banyoles & Madrid, Spain

Industry: Education

About My Business: My wife and I own a bricks-and-mortar English language school in Banyoles, a small town near Girona in Catalonia. We bought the school from its founding owner in August 2016 – so not long after the referendum result. In 2024, we bought a second English language-related business – a Madrid-based operation which serves as a hub for providing online English language classes to companies from all over Spain.

My Brexit Story: Even before our recent purchase of the Madrid business, we were very successful at acquiring customers for business English classes in the area around our school in Banyoles. Each time we became busier with this side of things, we handed more or our in-school teaching to other teachers. This meant recruitment.

Before December 2020, it was straightforward to recruit a qualified English teacher as a foreign language teacher at short notice from the UK. Successful candidates did not need a visa or work permit, and it was even possible to get them working ahead of them receiving a Spanish ID number.

Now, it is effectively impossible to hire a British teacher who is not already legal resident and legally able to work in Spain. The visa application process comes at a cost and its duration and outcome are both uncertain. While schools in large cities may still be able to find British teachers who have this status, we really struggle in Banyoles. This is a relatively affluent and correspondingly expensive area, and we can't easily attract teachers who live in cheaper parts of the country. Given the relatively shallow talent pool in our immediate area, given the challenges of recruiting from within Spain and given the impossibility of recruiting from the UK, our ability to grow the part of our business which involves sending teachers to teach in person at offices and factories is now completely stymied.

For decades, teaching English as a foreign language, which isn't a particularly high paying job, was seen by many British recent graduates as an opportunity to live and work in Europe for a couple years and then return to the UK to start their careers. There is a limit to what customers will pay for classes, running a business in Spain is not as cheap or as easy as you might imagine. Therefore, this pipeline of younger teachers was a crucial part of the recruitment mix for English language schools here.

My understanding is that for those young British people who do wish to use English teaching as a way of funding a couple of fun years abroad, Vietnam is now the hot location. I believe that demand for teachers there is high and I gather that the authorities there make it easy for them to get permission to work.

What I want to see change: I would like to see the UK and Spanish governments work closer together to create some sector-specific policies so that British teachers could more easily live and work in Spain. With the UK population seeming to move further to the right, I would also like to see the Government make more effort to get closer to Europe political right and unpick some of the damage of Brexit, whether this be through a youth mobility scheme or freedom of movement.

Dr Brian Edwards

Name: Dr Brian Edwards

Location: Surrey

Industry: Pharma industry



About my business: Before Brexit, I was a consultant for a larger pharma organisation but since 2020 I have become a sole trader and I work for myself. I used to be an EU Qualified Person for Pharmacovigilance (QPPV), which as a technical role is a very important role in a pharmaceutical company. Essentially, this person is held accountable for ensuring that the company complies with the correct regulations and that the medicines are safe.

My Brexit Story: Before Brexit, the UK had considerable influence and a lot of power over pharma companies in the EU through inspections and senior roles. The UK was one of the leaders in the safety area; roughly 60% of the EU QPPVs in the pharmaceutical industry came from the UK. Back in the early 2000s, the EU pharma regulations and practises had been largely written by the UK. So, the UK was a major driver of pharmacology practices and safety standards for medicines not only for the EU but globally. This was further reinforced by having the European Medicines Agency (EMA) based in London. Since Brexit, all EU QPPVs must all be EU citizens. This means that the UK now has a reduced control and influence in the sector. Since we left the EU, the UK has no say on how EU regulations are developed and applied (even though the UK originally wrote many of them) and any regulatory influence we had has now vanished. This is particularly noticeable in pharma inspections where the UK used to be the main pharmacovigilance inspectorate and now EU involvement in this area has gone, as we no longer have legal jurisdiction. In addition, before Brexit 40% of all new entrants to the EU pharma market would first register their companies in the UK. These companies would need guidance and would hire consultants like me to work for them, but since Brexit this has largely stopped and has led to a drastic decrease in my customer base and is a huge loss of revenue.

What I want to see change: The main priority is removing all the red tape caused by the Windsor Framework, which has added so much more complexity to regulations that do not benefit public health. Secondly, we need the government to provide reassurances that the UK QPPV role is being properly implemented and taken seriously by pharma companies. Finally, the government needs to do more to reconnect our scientific links with the EU, particularly sharing the main EMA databases and influencing safety procedures, to regain some harmonization and consistency of standards for safety of medicines.



International House Bristol

Name: Dr Val Hennessy

Location: Bristol

Industry: International education



About My business: International House Bristol is a family-run English School which began in 1987. We provide a wide range of courses for international students wanting to learn the English language and culture, as well as offering teacher training and exam preparation.

My Brexit Story: Before Brexit, the business taught 15 different languages with over 500 students and 73 members of staff, as well as several European interns. However, after Brexit we were forced to axe our language programs (apart from English) and our internship scheme as we couldn't employ international teachers, or access European students to work as interns. Sadly, we were forced to reduce our full-time staff to 16.

Our teacher training courses decreased significantly to only three courses per year with about six people attending and the number of European students coming to the UK diminished. The business essentially lost one revenue stream completely and halved the other income stream.

Another side effect of Brexit is the introduction of graduate visas which are designed to prevent people working in the UK because the visa is only valid for two years. By the time a company has gone through the lengthy hiring process it is highly unlikely that they will pick a candidate that can only stay in the UK for a short period of time. Unfortunately, this is something we have dealt with firsthand, and highlights how flawed this policy is.

Overall, Brexit severely depleted our access to the people we need in our business, both clients and staff, and reduce our contribution to the local economy by more than 60%

What I want to see change: We desperately need a youth mobility scheme, and to rejoin Erasmus+. Joining Erasmus+ is excellent news for our sector. Now, we desperately need a youth mobility scheme. Finally, we need to remove the need of passports for under 18-year-olds



Jayne Hamilton

Name: Jayne Hamilton

Location: Newcastle

Industry: freelance, technology and software development

About My Business: I have a master's degree in computer science and fluency in 5 European languages; when I first started out, I was able to apply for software development jobs in Europe. I landed a permanent job in the Netherlands where I lived and worked for several years. In 2005 I decided to become a freelancer and had clients across Europe such as Germany and Switzerland. In 2012 I set up my limited company, contracting work through various agencies within Europe to work on projects that could last 6 months or be on a rolling basis longer-term.

My Brexit Story: While working as a freelancer before Brexit, I always kept my base in Newcastle which worked well as I could live in one country and work in another without any barriers or restrictions. Once the EU referendum happened project adverts started listing 'EU citizens only' as a requirement, and from that point onwards finding projects only harder and worse. Suddenly British people were no longer attractive candidates despite their qualifications or work experience. We are also difficult to employ as the EU-UK TCA (Trade and Cooperation Agreement) includes a maximum service of 12 months. In my line of work a project could go on for years, so this regulation is detrimental. One of the countries I used to work in, Switzerland, is now completely blocked to me as the UK-Swiss deal only permits a 3 month work visa. Overall, I lost 90% of my customer base. In addition, we're not just talking about financial losses but also the loss of knowledge exchange. I learned so many new skills working in Europe that I could bring back to the UK and share but now we are completely isolated.

The pandemic also played an important role as the way we work shifted to more remote opportunities, although many companies still advertise 'remote working in the EU only' on job adverts. Even smaller issues like shipping a laptop from an EU country to the UK or vice versa is an obstacle in itself, as packages can get stuck in customs for months. As a freelancer working on a time-limited project this causes huge problems. To adapt, I have had to find more contracts in the UK, although these projects aren't as lucrative as the opportunities available in Europe where freelancers can often earn double UK rates.

What I want to see change: Freedom of movement or a mobility scheme for people of all ages, not just young people, would create so many new opportunities for British and EU citizens. A standardisation of the TCA agreement by all European countries would be hugely beneficial; a key part of this would be to remove the 12-month limitation on British people working in Europe, as well as making clear guidelines for freelancers working abroad too.



Jim's British Market Business Case Study

Name: Chris Anderson

Location: Gland, Switzerland

Industry: Retail, food

About My Business: Jim's British Market is a store specialising in British food products – we like to say we sell nostalgia. Our first store in France opened in 1996 which was hugely successful, so we decided to open a second store in 2012 in Switzerland (which is now our only physical store), as well as our online shop, in 2021. We are proud to be considered the number one retailer of British food products in Switzerland. In terms of customers, over 90% of our customers are British expatriates; and we have a large online customer base as well as selling products in high-end supermarkets in Switzerland.

My Brexit Story: There is no denying that the biggest challenge since Brexit is financial strains on our profit margin. We now incur additional charges and costs which are added at every step of the importing and exporting journey. For example, our exporter has the responsibility of completing all the necessary paperwork, which takes the burden off us but does come with an added cost.

The second biggest challenge is the changes in our supply chain business model. Before Brexit the importing process was straightforward, we would place an order for goods and as soon as a vehicle was available the products would be shipped to us. However, since Brexit there are considerably more barriers to importing products. It's well known now, of course, that Brexit has brought in new regulations for the transportation of animal products. This means we need to pay for an EHC certificate for every type of animal product. Sometimes, within the same certificate, if it's a re-import and export, we must get a new certificate as the products are categorised differently. As a result, we have had to modify how our business operates to account for the additional logistics and planning. It is impossible for our business to be reactive as every decision comes with a series of new rules and paperwork, and therefore additional processing time.

Finally, we have migrated a third of our suppliers from the UK to other European countries because it is cheaper for some products, and more efficient. This in turn has a knock-on effect to the UK economy as we aren't trading as much with UK suppliers.

What I want to change: First and foremost, I want to see a free trade deal established with the EU so that we can get back to a model where everyone benefits.



John Dale

Name: John Dale

Location: Slovakia

Industry: Arts



About My Business: I moved from the UK to Slovakia when I was 22 and when it wasn't a member of the EU yet (Slovakia joined the EU in 2004). I am a self-employed touring musician, writer, and voice over actor, which I did all over Europe for many years. I did a lot of major voiceover campaigns, which entailed traveling to various European countries.

My Brexit Story: Freedom of movement enabled me to travel freely throughout Europe and take job contracts from any European country without difficulty. Most of my work was done through a UK license and so when the EU referendum results were announced in 2016, I felt the immediate impact. The first thing I noticed was people's perceptions of Brits changed instantly, we were just seen as any other third country nationals and attitudes towards us shifted. As a touring musician, and someone who is self-employed, having a negative connotation with being British affected how possible employers perceived me, and how many jobs I got. In addition, as the only native English-speaking member of my band I used to organise all our permits and paperwork. But after leaving the EU this became more difficult and would be in a full-time job in itself to apply for permits for every country we wanted to perform and explain that I have frontier worker status. So, I made the difficult decision to leave the band.

Prior to leaving the EU I would perform in between 3-5 countries a week, but since Brexit I have only done one concert in Europe which took 3 months to arrange. It also cost me more money than what I made. I lost approximately 90% of my income and so to adapt I started a side business manufacturing guitar tools to generate an income, as well as taking more voiceover jobs. Brexit forced me to learn something completely different and essentially start over again.

What I want to see change: The 90/180-day rule is a huge challenge for artists wanting to tour around Europe, and so I would like the government to prioritise working with the EU to remove this barrier. Joining the single market and customs union would also have considerable benefits for all consumers and businesses in the UK and Europe. Finally, I want to see the UK government do more to educate British people on the EU and reopen the debate to show the positives of becoming a member again.



Made In Britain

Name: John Pearce, CEO
Location: Worcestershire, West Midlands
Industry: Manufacturing



About My Business: Made in Britain is a new trade body which brings together the British manufacturing community, united with the use of the official, registered trademarks. It is a not-for-profit organisation which began in April 2013 and has over 2,000 members.

Our Story: To give some background on our members, around half are producing retail goods while the other half are producing industrial goods; and a large amount of our members are also exporters who export goods across the world, including Europe. While Brexit has had an impact on our members, it is important to widen our assessment to consider additional external factors, specifically the rise in inflation and energy costs. When talking to our members, the cost of energy is constantly highlighted as the biggest challenge to profitability. As a result of these external factors, Made in Britain has unified a sector in the economy which otherwise would have gone unheard and underrepresented.

As so many of our members export around the world, losing Europe as a market isn't necessarily seen as a significant loss. Some may decide to leave Europe alone for a decade and choose to enter different market in the rest of the world instead. While Europe is a friendly and reliable market it is also highly competitive, meaning other markets worldwide might be more profitable, at least for the time being.

What I want to see change: Firstly, energy credits or energy support from the government would be welcomed.

Secondly, a product agreement with the EU to allow manufacturers to ship product samples to Europe would greatly help to companies. Our members have complained about the difficulty of shipping samples to Europe - often products are sent back or haven't got the correct paperwork, which is ever changing. It has also become far more expensive to send sample products to Europe and is too risky for businesses. For a sector that relies on physical products, a sensible product agreement with Europe is key.

Finally, a trading relationship reset is crucial. Losing this soft power is significant and we need to work on building our relationship back with Europe.



Minster Development Centre Ltd

Name: Christine Lester FRSA

Location: Staffordshire, West Midlands

Industry: Education

About my Business: Minster Development Centre started in 1994 as a vocational education centre which gave students the opportunity to achieve a higher level of qualifications than what was previously available at other colleges across the country. Five years after starting Minster Development Centre I then created a second organisation called West Midlands Tomorrow which was a regional project aimed at transferring knowledge and skills across the region.

My Brexit Story: Once I had established my two organisations it was clear that there were greater opportunities to expand in Europe and so I bid for funding through the Erasmus+ program. My applications were successful for projects for both of my companies – Minster was focused on vocational training and WM Tomorrow was more visionary, looking at what issues we need to solve in the world. Being a part of Erasmus+ wasn't just about the funding but about sharing knowledge with other countries, networking, and access to training. Erasmus+ was a huge opportunity for us, but when we left the European Union and the deadline for both projects arrived, we no longer qualified for any more funding. To keep the businesses afloat I decided to prioritise Minster Development Centre and ultimately invested a lot of my own money so that we could continue on with our important work. The only positive out of everything was I was forced to make new connections globally and I now have a catalogue of contacts across the world such as Australia and Sri Lanka which I otherwise wouldn't have made. Now that the UK government has announced we are joining Erasmus+ from 2027 I am hopeful that I can bid for funding again.

What I want to see change: I would like to see the UK provide more support for literacy for young people and be more ambitious with how we work with Europe. Furthermore, the government should concentrate on small businesses like mine and provide more help and guidance.



NoFit State

Name: Alison Woods, Executive Director

Location: Cardiff, Wales

Industry: Arts

About My Business: NoFit State was founded in 1986 by five friends and is the UK's leading large-scale contemporary circus company, producing professional touring productions and a wide variety of community, training, and education projects for people of all ages. We have a core team of 17 and hire around 80 freelancers throughout the year.



My Brexit story: The impact of Brexit on our organisation has been entirely negative. Before Brexit, touring in mainland Europe was simple and easy – there were no barriers or work permits. We've always had a business model where we generate a lot of income from outside the UK and bring that money back into the UK. Brexit has made that considerably more difficult. For example, we now need visas anytime we employ someone from Europe which brings with it approximately a £1,000 surcharge per contract, so every time we employ somebody this is an additional cost to the business.

One of the key benefits of EU membership was the reciprocal healthcare arrangement, where EU citizens had access to free healthcare in any EU country, meaning you didn't need medical insurance. Now, we have to buy medical insurance for all our employees, which is another additional cost we must cover.

Furthermore, the cost of transporting production equipment to and from Europe is considerable. Each item we move must be registered on our carnets (a passport listing all the items we are transporting), and with a big touring production like ours we are talking about thousands and thousands of items. Organising the carnets is a bureaucratic nightmare. In the early stages of Brexit the rules were unclear and it was evident that border force agents didn't know the regulations, sometimes resulting in our trucks being held for weeks at a time with no explanation as to why.

Finally, another challenge for us is the 90/180 day rule where non-EU/EEA citizens can travel visa-free in the Schengen Area for a maximum of 90 days within any rolling 180-day period. This has been incredibly difficult to navigate. The only solution we have found is to add a clause in our contract with freelancers stating that they are not allowed to go on holiday to Europe prior to starting a contract with us. In addition, we tour less in Europe and sadly have to turn down bookings because as a company we can only be in Europe for up to 90 days in every 180 days. As a result, our income from Europe has decreased – approximately 10% of our overall turnover is lost.

What I want to see change: there should be freedom of movement and free association for artists and intellectuals. This should also include unrestricted periods of employment for both EU and UK citizens. Reestablishing the reciprocal healthcare arrangement would make life easier not just for businesses like mine, but for all UK citizens travelling to Europe. Finally, removing the 90/180-day rule would be hugely beneficial.



Nova Dog Chews

Name: Anton Murphy

Location: Kilmaurs, Ayrshire

Industry: Manufacturing; importing and exporting; supply of pet food

About My Business: Nova Dog Chews Limited is a manufacturer and supplier of natural dog treats, snacks and chews based in Scotland and France. We supply products throughout the UK, Europe and the rest of the world direct to the customer as well as to pet shops and wholesalers.

My Brexit story: Before Brexit the company was selling products to 22 EU countries from our primary base in Scotland but after the UK left the single market it became more difficult to export. Suddenly, we needed independent health certificates issued by vets, not to mention the paperwork to import and export increased dramatically, as did our costs. As a result, we decided to open a company base in France to ship to the EU and hire a dedicated customs agent. This certainly stifled our business growth as the cost to adapt was so great. Importing goods into the UK has become more challenging and costly as there are no standard regulations for UK ports resulting in containers being refused for minor discrepancies in the paperwork and no opportunity to rectify it. The amount of time it takes to import is so frustrating and reduces the life cycle of our products. The company incurs approximately £1,000 per week in additional costs from customs agent fees, common user charges, and ports charges just for importing our goods into the UK.

What I want to see change: Firstly, companies like mine would benefit greatly from entering into a customs union agreement for food and animal food products. Secondly, reducing transport costs. Finally, in an ideal world the UK would rejoin the single market.



Paws Pet Transport

Name: Austin Wildmoore

Location: Harrogate, Yorkshire

Industry: Services; animals



About My Business: Paws Pet Transport was a pet transportation company which moved people's animals between the UK, France, and Spain. As well as moving pets, we also worked with a number of charities to transport rescue animals to their new homes.



My Brexit story: When I took over the company in 2016 it had a solid customer base and was making a good profit. I was so confident in the business that I invested money from my second business to upgrade our specialist vehicles. When the Brexit referendum happened, I didn't believe any UK government would seek the deal we ended up with, I couldn't imagine a government would inflict this on its own nation. However, as soon as the final agreement was in place and we were faced with a hard tariff Brexit, my business was affected overnight. Suddenly, all our veterinary licenses were null and void, and there were no reciprocal licenses available. Our biggest problem was boarder control in the UK. There was a phenomenal amount of confusion, it was essentially Russian roulette every time we arrived at Calais as the rules would change all the time. The number of animals per person we could transport changed, which significantly impacted our operation, and profits. Overall, the collapse of the business was a direct result of Brexit.

What I want to see change: The UK needs to have single market access as well as a dynamic alignment veterinary agreement in place. The worst-case scenario should have been 'soft Brexit' and so I will always be an advocate for re-negotiating with Europe as soon as possible.

Pie Events

Name: Tina Makin

Location: Surrey

Industry: Travel, events



About My Business: We design and deliver bespoke UK and European cycle rides for UK charities, corporates and discerning cyclists. All our routes are individually designed for the customer including a full package of staff, guides, medics, transport, and personalised routes.

My Brexit Story: Pre-Brexit, the majority of our events were point-to-point bike routes such as London to Paris, or London to Amsterdam plus exploring the riding all over Europe. However, since Brexit there has been a noticeable shift in behaviours from clients towards more UK-based events. This is largely due to the costs associated with going to the EU.



The biggest challenge for us is the increased costs and admin associated with using Carnets (temporary and tax-free export/import of goods). As part of our service, we arrange the transport of all the bicycles and equipment which before Brexit, was as simple as loading up a van and setting off. Now, this entails a series, of long-winded forms for both my business and the customer. For example, each individual participating in a bike ride is required to fill out a form detailing the exact make, model and colour of the bicycle, as well as where it was manufactured and its value. We have to collate this information well in advance to be submitted and processed in time so the paperwork can be ready for the start of the event. However, this can be an issue if a customer swaps bicycles, for example due to a breakage, and we have to take that bicycle off the Carnet system leaving the individual to arrange carriage of their bikes themselves. The carnet is a substantial cost to the business as we pay for the pleasure of using a Carnet as well as paying a fee per bicycle (a percentage of the bicycle's value). As a business we work a year in advance, but it's become increasingly difficult to forecast our annual costs as we won't know how much each Carnet will be until we know the value of contents of the van, which changes for each event we organise. This adds another level of uncertainty and risk for us.



Lack of freedom of movement has also had a huge impact on us as we employed a significant number of British freelancers to work in Europe, such as guides and medics. Some of these UK based freelancers are counting individual days they have available to work in the EU and are turning down work, they would previously have been happy to take as they have no more days left in the EU.

We also used English speaking European staff. Sadly, due to the change in movement rules, some providers of Tour Operator insurance have made it a requirement we can now only employ people from the UK. As a result, all of our European staff that we have been let go along with their local expertise and knowledge.

Finally, Europe itself is getting smaller for us to operate in as there are countries we simply cannot operate in at all. As an example, to organise an event in Croatia we are now required to supply all receipts and expenses in the local language. As a small team of 5 based in Surrey we obviously don't have the skills or capacity to do this. Before Brexit we were dealing with the EU as a whole, whereas now we are required to comply with the different rules of each individual country, limiting our options.

What I want to see change: Alignment with EU and UK rules is vital, as well as a customs union and freedom of movement.



Scribble & Daub

Name: Tim Kent, Director

Location: East Sussex

Industry: Wholesale

About the Business: Scribble & Daub creates luxurious illustrated cards & decorations designed to be kept and treasured. We use the finest materials and artisan processes to offer a collection of heirloom cards & decorations that are tiny hand-painted works of art. The business was incorporated in 2019 and now stocks stores including Liberty, Fortum & Mason, Gleneagles Hotel and many stores and galleries worldwide.

Our Brexit Story: There are two channels we sell our products through; direct to consumer and wholesale. When the business first started it was easy to do both and ship our products to Europe without any issues. But as the Brexit rules were gradually introduced this changed. It became increasingly difficult to post packages to Europe without them getting stopped and held in customs for unknown periods of time. The importing and exporting rules seemed to be so inconsistent that it was impossible to know why certain packages were held in customs and others weren't. Some of the stores we stocked in Europe decided it wasn't worth the risk to buy from the UK and dropped us as customers. The shipping delays are a huge issue for us as many of our products are seasonal and hand made. For example, if a store in Paris orders Christmas cards it is critical they arrive ontime otherwise the window for selling them is dramatically reduced.

The other impact on our business is the strain imposed on our customer relationships. If our customers cannot rely on packages arriving on time, we simply lose the customer. As a small business, maintaining good relationships with our customers is our biggest priority. To manage this, we have had to make difficult decisions to ensure our customers remain at the forefront of the business. Our direct-to-consumer sales took a permanent blow that we decided not to sell to Europe for a time until we discovered a small business in Estonia that now handles all our European VAT, meaning we can sell to customers in Europe again. We also use a wholesale platform which take on the responsibility of organising the necessary paperwork. Both come with an added cost of course, but it is worth it to guarantee that our customers receive the best and fastest service possible.

What we want to see change: Firstly, access to the single market would make it significantly easier to trade and ship to our European neighbours. Furthermore, when packages are stuck in customs it is a bureaucratic nightmare with no-one to talk to ask what the issue is. Therefore, a dedicated customs service with consistent guidance and messaging would be invaluable. Finally, I would like to see the government do more to support small businesses to provide clear instructions and updates on what Brexit policies are in place and how businesses can follow them, to reduce any confusion.



Seiont Nurseries

Name: Neil Alcock, Managing Director

Location: Caernarfon, Wales

Industry: Plants distribution

About My Business: Seiont Nurseries was established in 1978 and is a well-respected plug and liner producer with an annual production of 850,000 liners and 400,000 plugs.

My Brexit story: Up until 2020 we exported 18% of our products to Europe but now our exports have dropped to less than 2%. This is all down to the additional layers of paperwork and the associated costs now involved in shipping into the EU. This translated to increased costs to our customers which of course made our products less desirable to our European customers. We are continuing to do some exporting to Europe but now the preparation time takes three times longer than it did before 2020. Thankfully we have had no difficulties importing from Brexit, but exporting has been the biggest challenge to our business.

What I want to see change: I would like to see the Brexit deal renegotiated now we have a clearer understanding of what Brexit actually means. For example, rejoining the single market and customs union would greatly benefit businesses like mine.



Simply Morzine

Name: Gareth Marshall

Location: Morzine, French Alps

Industry: Travel

SIMPLY MORZINE

About My Business: We offer unique high-quality alpine holidays in Morzine, operating since 1995. This business is independently owned and managed by my family; we pride ourselves on the very best-located properties, unrivalled personal service and exceptional cuisine. Simply Morzine is highly regarded for integrity, quality and flexibility. Finally, our customer base is primarily British tourists.



My Brexit story: Prior to Brexit, our business operated with a small core team and then seasonal staff who we hired to work the main seasons, winter and summer. The demographic of our seasonal staff were mainly young British people at graduate age who were hired through a UK booking agent and then onboarded through our French agency, as we are fully registered in France. Prior to Brexit, under the freedom of movement provisions, it was possible to employ a British citizen on a French contract with minimal administrative overheads.

However, since Brexit, this has become a tortuous process. Now we have had to cast a wider net and are having to hire people based on their passport rather than just merit, in many ways, Brits are now at the 'back of the queue'. With this comes a number of challenges such as maintaining our service standard with a smaller labour pool, losing employees who understand our British clients and covering additional training costs. The pre-Brexit years are like utopia in comparison to nowadays where there are barriers at every turn. Working a ski season as a young Brit was a cultural experience and a fantastic way to work abroad and learn about a new country, but now these opportunities are limited. The small number of Brits we do hire must go through a long and often delayed visa process, if a visa is denied (for minor reasons such as a small blemish on a passport) then I'm down members of staff. There's just so many risks at every turn. To adapt to the post-Brexit operating framework, we are required to commence the recruitment process several months in advance in order to accommodate any unforeseen staffing shortfalls.



What I want to change: Firstly, freedom of movement is vital for our industry both from a customer and staff perspective. Improved opportunities for young people to live, work and study abroad in the EU is so important too; a youth mobility scheme that is as broad as possible would be fantastic. Finally, mutual recognition of qualifications would have a huge impact on our business and sector too. For example, qualifications in Passenger Transport Management which I completed in the UK, in my mother tongue, overnight were no longer recognised in France. It took months of time and effort to transfer my UK qualification to a French qualification to permit my license to transfer customers to and from the airport to our chalets. So, a mutual recognition of qualification would be incredibly useful.



Wales Ape and Monkey Sanctuary

Name: Jan Garen, co-owner and trustee

Location: Caehopkin, Wales

Industry: Animal rescue and charity sector



About Our Organisation: The sanctuary rescues and provides a home for many types of unwanted animals, especially primates, such as chimpanzees, gibbons, and baboons. We undertake several rescues from zoos and laboratories where animals have suffered mistreatment and deprivation, or are no longer wanted.

Our Brexit Story: In our role as GAP (Great Ape Project) Sanctuary Europe, we have rescued many apes and monkeys from European closed zoos, bad zoos and laboratories since we began two decades ago. The journeys have ranged from Bulgaria and Poland to the extreme south of Spain and many more countries inbetween. We have our own dedicated Rescue Ambulance and prior to Brexit all inspections of the vehicle were carried out in the UK. Now to obtain a Type 2 Transport Certificate we have had to appoint an agent in an EU country, and then make a special trip to that country in the ambulance for it to be inspected. Even then we have only been able to travel to Germany and France for recent rescues.

Of course, the problems do not stop there! The paperwork now before a journey and afterwards is overwhelming. We have to use an agent to allow the ambulance through the Channel Tunnel as they are authorised to deal with Cites and Imports. All of this adds significant cost. The actual journey now takes longer which is not suitable for live animals in transport crates. It is horrendous.

Before Brexit we had none of these problems. We drove on and off the train without any form of delay whatever time we got to Calais. Now office hours apply. Sadly, I don't think we would be able to make an emergency rescue now. For example, before Brexit we were able to rescue 5 monkeys from dreadful conditions in Spain within 4 weeks of finding out about them and that same year we made 6 trips to Europe. After Brexit, this would be near impossible.

What I want to see change: Simply, to Re-join the EU. With new Brexit rules and policies, animals are treated like commodities and rejoining the EU would be the only thing to improve animal welfare.



Key cross-cutting themes from business

Common barriers

A review of the responses provided by participating businesses reveals several consistent barriers and challenges, irrespective of company size, sector, or geographic location.

The most frequently cited challenge was the overall increase in operating costs. Businesses reported higher expenses arising from import and export duties, additional recruitment and training requirements, and, in some cases, relocation costs. These financial pressures have reduced profit margins and constrained opportunities for growth and investment.

Many respondents also emphasised the additional administrative requirements associated with trading with Europe. These include expanded customs documentation, visa applications for employees, and specialised certification processes, such as those required for the transportation of animals. Such requirements are both time-consuming and high-risk: even minor errors in documentation can result in goods being delayed in customs for indefinite periods of time, without explanation. Consequently, some businesses now regard trading with Europe as commercially unviable due to the increased complexity and uncertainty involved.

Furthermore, new barriers to trade have led to a substantial contraction in accessible markets and customer bases. With the European market representing a population of approximately over 460 million people, compared with around 69.3 million in the UK, the loss of easy access constitutes a significant commercial disadvantage. In response, many businesses have been compelled to adapt their operating models and strategic focus in order to survive.

Finally, respondents highlighted the broader loss of shared knowledge and collaboration between the UK and the EU. A less integrated trading relationship limits opportunities for the exchange of skills, training, and innovation, to the detriment of businesses on both sides.





Policy signals

Three principal policy recommendations emerged consistently from the businesses consulted.

First, respondents emphasised that rejoining the single market and customs union would restore frictionless trade with European partners, delivering wide-ranging benefits for UK businesses. In their view, reduced trade barriers would lower costs, simplify supply chains, and enhance competitiveness across sectors.

Second, many participants highlighted the importance of freedom of movement in strengthening the labour market. The ability to recruit from across the EU without the need for visas or sponsorship costs would significantly ease current workforce shortages and reduce administrative burdens. For sectors that depend heavily on tourism and seasonal labour, freedom of movement was described as particularly critical to long-term sustainability and growth.

Finally, businesses stressed the importance of the mutual recognition of professional qualifications. Standardised recognition frameworks are essential in enabling professionals to operate across European markets, directly affecting recruitment, operating costs, market access, and overall competitiveness. Given that services constitute a major component of UK exports, many professions and firms rely on recognised credentials to deliver services in Europe. Mutual recognition would therefore allow UK businesses to employ EU-trained professionals more easily, while ensuring that UK-qualified professionals can work across Europe without the need for duplicative retraining or requalification.

7 Our recommendations

As the UK Government builds on its UK-EU reset, there is a clear opportunity to listen to the voices of UK business and ensure that economic growth, support for SMEs and cutting red tape are at the heart of the reset. In our recent qualitative and quantitative studies, the single market, freedom of movement and continued improvements in the relationship with the European Union are important to the UK business community.

The case studies in this report show the unmet need for the business community. Our recommendations to the UK Government are:

1. Join the single market and customs union
2. Restore freedom of movement
3. Give SMEs a voice in UK-EU negotiations

Conclusion: Grasping the opportunity of a generation

Taken together, the evidence points to a clear strategic choice. The UK's departure from the single market has introduced trade frictions, regulatory duplication, supply chain disruption and labour market constraints that weigh most heavily on smaller firms. As we heard in our case studies, while businesses have demonstrated resilience, adaptation carries costs, and over time those costs accumulate in the form of reduced competitiveness, lower investment and constrained opportunity.

If the objective is to strengthen productivity, expand exports and position the UK confidently within a world of large economic blocs, incremental adjustments will not be sufficient. A structural reset is required.

First, the UK should seek to join the single market and customs union. Doing so would address the root causes of current frictions by restoring regulatory alignment, removing rules of origin requirements, and establishing seamless trade in goods and services. For manufacturers, exporters and service providers alike, this would mean lower transaction costs and more predictable market access.

Second, any negotiated arrangement must include freedom of movement. Labour mobility is not peripheral to economic integration; it underpins it. A functioning single market depends on the ability of skills and talent to move where they are most productive. Restoring mobility would ease labour shortages, strengthen fiscal sustainability and expand opportunities for UK citizens across Europe.



The EU/EEA market has a population of about 460 million people, compared with just under 70 million in the UK



Third, the voice of SMEs must be heard in the UK–EU summit and in future trade discussions. Smaller businesses have borne a disproportionate share of post-Brexit complexity yet often lack direct representation in high-level negotiations. Embedding SME voices in policymaking would ensure that agreements are designed around practical commercial realities, not abstract principles.

The opportunity before policymakers is generational: to move beyond managed decline and toward renewed dynamism, scale and confidence. Grasping that opportunity requires clarity of purpose and political courage, but the prize is substantial. A more competitive economy, broader opportunities for citizens, and a stable platform for long-term prosperity in an increasingly interconnected world.



European
Movement
United Kingdom

JOIN OUR MOVEMENT TODAY

Become a member of the European Movement today, and help us shine a light on the impacts of Brexit, and build the case for positive changes to our relationship with the EU. If you are a member, you can get more involved by reaching out to your local activist group.

You can find a map of our groups and their contact details at our website:

grassroots.europeanmovement.co.uk/localgroups-map

If you are a business owner and would like to get more involved with the European Movement, either by sharing your story, or joining our *'Business with Europe'* network.

Contact: businesswitheurope@europeanmovement.co.uk

SCAN NOW TO JOIN

