



## INTERIM REPORT: DECEMBER 2024

The Brexit Couples project (2023-26) is charting the experiences of UK-EU couples as they negotiate the UK family migration regime after Brexit. We have analysed Census and Labour Force Survey data to understand the existing UK-EU couple population, are using immigration statistics to map partner visa applications from EU countries since Brexit, and are interviewing both UK-EU couples negotiating the new barriers to living together in the UK, and experts working in relevant fields. This interim report sets out some key initial findings from our work so far.

### How common are UK-EU couples?

Around 4% (1 in 25) of cohabiting/married couples in England and Wales consist of one UK-born and one EU-born partner - just under 580,000 couples (UK Census 2021)

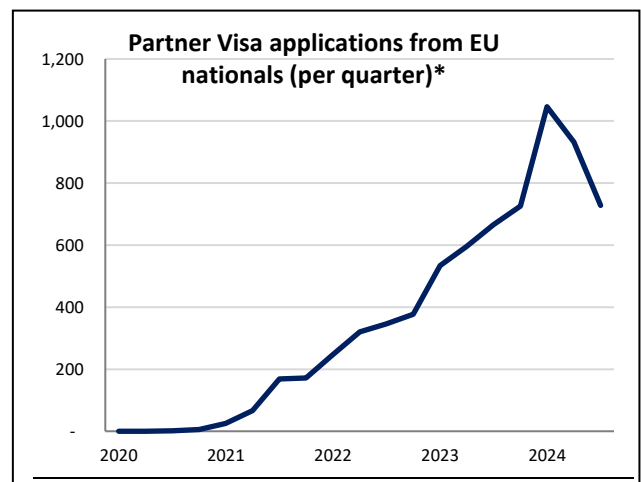
Relationships between people from the UK and those from the EU are very common. The figure would be even higher if naturalised UK and EU citizens were included as Census data records only country of birth.

The UK-EU couple population in the UK is diverse in terms of both nationality and socio-economic position. The largest countries of origin for EU partners are Germany, Poland, France, Italy and Spain. UK-EU couples are more likely than people in UK-UK couples (both partners born in the UK) to be in higher managerial, administrative or professional occupations (50% vs 41%). There are also higher rates of same sex relationships among UK-EU couples (7% vs 3% UK-UK).

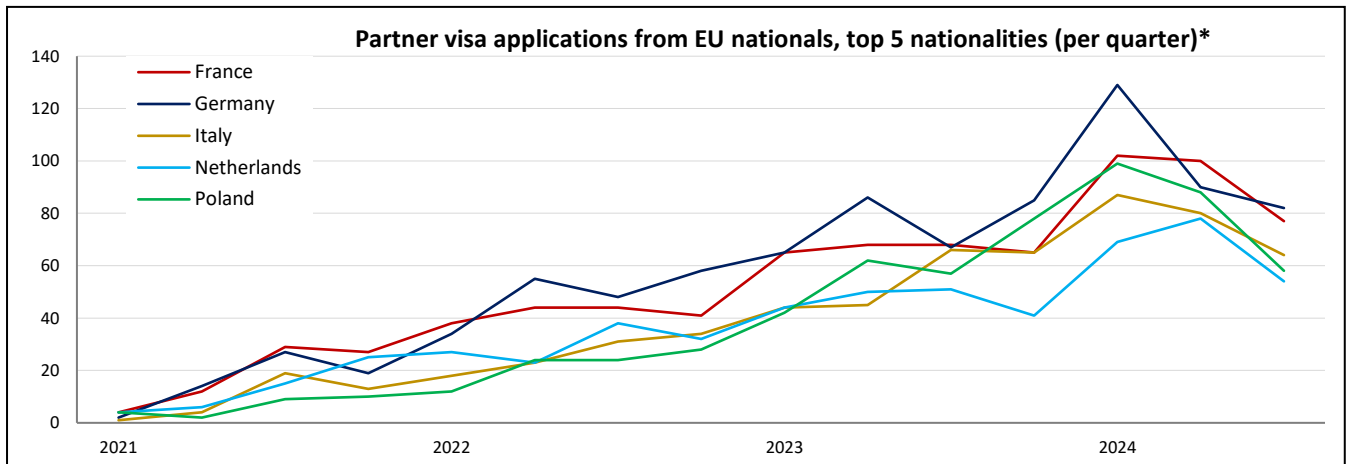
### How many EU partners apply for UK family visas?

Until 2021, UK-EU couples could use EU free movement to live together in the UK, and many EU partners could apply for Settled or Pre-settled Status. Now, those who have not qualified for the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS) have to apply for a visa to live with a partner in the UK. With late EUSS applications becoming more difficult, there have been increasing numbers of partner visa application from EU countries.

In April 2024, the Minimum Income Requirement (MIR) for family visas increased from £18,600 to £29,000. This caused a spike in applications to avoid the new rate, followed by a significant drop. Fewer people can now meet the MIR and this is likely to depress future numbers of applications.



\*UK Home Office Immigration System Statistics (28/11/2024)



Applications for partner visas come from a variety of EU countries. This graph shows the 5 largest groups and numbers of applications over time. The ten largest nationality groups are (in size order): Germany, Poland, Italy, France, Netherlands, Spain, Romania, Greece, Portugal and Sweden.

### Large numbers of UK-EU couples affected by the change are invisible in the visa statistics

The immigration statistics do not show the large numbers of couples who cannot apply for a visa because they cannot afford the fees (nearly £5,000 for the initial application alone), or because the UK partner does not meet the income requirement (around half of the UK working population cannot). The numbers of UK-EU couples who want to settle together in the UK are therefore likely to be considerably higher than the visa application figures.

## Who have we interviewed for the Brexit Couples project?

**Couples:** 59 Couples have taken part in the research, aged 20 to 73 and from 19 nationalities. Some were in post-Brexit relationships, some already lived in the UK but did not have EU Settled status, while others had been living overseas and planned to return to the UK. They include those who had been granted visas, were still in the visa process, were deciding what to do, or were unable to apply. We are interviewing many again to follow their stories.

**Experts:** Interviews with 15 people working in key roles in relevant fields, including immigration lawyers, community workers, and representatives of support organisations.

## What have we learned so far?

### Lack of anticipation of the impact of Brexit on couples and families

The ongoing impact of Brexit for UK-EU couples was not a focus of Brexit negotiations or media coverage. It is not surprising that our participants also did not anticipate the profound effect of Brexit for their future plans together. Some couples do not realise the EU partner now needs a visa to live in the UK, until they try to return to after a trip abroad.

### Shock of transition: from EU free movement to the most restrictive family immigration system in the world

The EU Settlement Scheme was designed to be simple for most eligible people, and the end of EU free movement has been eased for short-term EU travellers by visa-free visits. When couples without EUSS want to settle in the UK, however, they are shocked by the demands, complexity and cost of family visas.

‘It feels like the couples and their relationships... marriages between British citizens and European citizens wasn’t part of the discussions and the debate of how Brexit is gonna go through. It was almost like after they talked about the trade deals and customs and taxes and what’s gonna happen with this and that, and the talks were done - *then* they realised, “Oh, you know what... we also have *people* that are caught within this” (EU participant with UK partner)

### Negative impacts compounded by increase in the Minimum Income Requirement

Increasing the MIR from £18,600 to £29,000 in April 2024 multiplied the numbers of couples and families negatively

impacted by the transition. Lower income groups are particularly affected, including those with caring responsibilities and younger people in further education or early in their careers (at just the time of life when many long term relationships develop).

### **Impacts on UK-EU couples living overseas who planned to return to the UK**

UK-EU couples living overseas often have long-term plans to return to the UK (e.g. for retirement or to care for family members). Over decades many British citizens moved to EU countries, expecting they could later return, but now find their EU partners cannot return with them without a visa. For those with savings or high income, plans may just be delayed, but others (e.g. pensioners on lower incomes, British primary carers) are trapped overseas.

### **Costly, complicated, stressful: impacts on health and wellbeing**

The UK family visa system is *complicated, difficult to understand, stressful, expensive and lengthy*. Our participants speak of time and stress spent trying to get to grips with the requirements, and the intense and extended pressure of uncertainty over their futures together. Many reported impacts on their mental and physical health. The process is particularly challenging for neurodiverse couples or those already dealing with physical or mental ill-health.

*Lack of clarity* in the family visa application process creates risks for applicants. A key example: the visa website gives the option to apply from within the UK without making clear this is only permitted for those with long term immigration status. Some participants mistakenly took this to mean they could apply from the UK whilst visiting. Such applications are likely to be refused, with loss of the time, fees and future plans invested in the process.

The *huge expense* of the family immigration system causes financial pressure and impacts on couples' future prospects. Some take out loans, credit card debt, or use money set aside for home purchase or other plans.

### **Separating families: the limits of visit visas**

The MIR is well-known for separating families while the UK partner builds up the necessary earnings record. EU citizen partners have an advantage over many nationalities as they can visit the UK without a visa. But this is not a substitute for building a life together, as visits must not be too lengthy or too frequent and working in the UK is prohibited. Partner visa applications must also be made outside the UK, meaning separation while the application is processed.

### **Leaving the UK...**

Some UK-EU couples who cannot meet the visa requirements are forced to leave the UK to be together. For some, this is an acceptable option, but for others means abandoning valued careers and lives and/or moving to a country where the British partner lacks language proficiency for employment and social integration.

### **Or living precariously...**

Others attempt to maintain their relationship through extended visits, despite the disadvantages of living 'in limbo'. Lack of clarity on

X had just found a job in the UK to earn the previous MIR when the increase was announced. It would come in before he had 6 months of payslips. Devastated, they decided to relocate to the EU partner's country, near Ukraine. They hope the UK would be flexible about visas if war spreads, as she can't currently move to the UK and he can't move elsewhere in the EU.

'You have no idea what's going to happen next... no sense of certainty about your life at all... your entire lives are at a standstill... I just got depressed and it got worse and worse... And then that puts stress on your relationship... I was depressed because I couldn't go home, and [UK partner] was about to start the [cancer] treatment ... at some point I just planned, in great detail, the way I wanted to end my life because of this... it was the most stressful period in my life.'

(EU partner of UK citizen with cancer)

A neurodiverse couple who met online were able to be together on his extended visits to the UK. She has EU Pre-settled Status, and was studying for a degree, so was unable to meet the MIR. The couple reported intolerable stress from hours trying to understand the visa system, uncertainty over the rules on permitted visits (would he be turned away permanently at the border?), and their inability to find a way to be together permanently. They eventually relocated to his country, where she is unable to use her qualification, lacks language fluency, and may lose her EUSS status, affecting her ability to return.

the visitor rules creates additional stress, as a border official may decide visits have been too frequent and refuse entry. Some may stay in the UK without immigration status, access to full healthcare, or the right to rent, work or access services, becoming vulnerable to exploitation.

One mother stayed in the UK to work while her partner and baby son left the country to apply for his visa. This meant she had to stop breastfeeding: 'Until then I was the one that put him to sleep and also I was breastfeeding at that point. And so when he left that was like, done... In the beginning... when I would video call them, he would see me and cry. So the first days we wouldn't really talk on the video, because he would just cry.'

### Caught between EUSS and the family immigration system

Some EU citizens eligible for the EUSS have not managed to gain settled/pre-settled status due to digital exclusion or because they lack evidence of residence. People living precarious lives are unlikely to meet family visa requirements, but leaving the UK would mean separation from established lives and families. Free EUSS advice services were funded, but are now ending, and free or low cost immigration advice is scarce.

### Stratified rights to family life in the UK after Brexit

The ability of UK-EU couples to make their lives together in the UK after Brexit is highly stratified. Some have access to other visa routes (e.g. high skilled work). Others have financial resources to meet the requirements, pay fees, or engage lawyers to handle the complicated process. Those without these advantages are excluded from the family visa system – an increasingly large population since the end of the Brexit transition period and increase to the MIR. Exemptions from the MIR for those on disability benefits or due to 'exceptional circumstances' are rare.

### Alienation and deterrence

Even those who can meet the visa requirements are shocked by their experience of the UK's family immigration system. For British citizens, it challenges their understanding of citizenship.

'You've got a very inefficient, uncompassionate system here, that has an impact on British citizens... Stare us in the eyes as a family and tell us why we can't live in this country – *me* who's served it for 17 years, the boys who were born here, [EU partner] who gave birth to them here; we've paid tax here – I pay tax here... What is the reason why we can't live in our own country, which is what they're saying?' (British participant returning to UK with family)

The family immigration system may also act as a deterrent to potential EU migrants, including the highly skilled.

A highly educated scientist who has lived in the UK for years has EU settled status and has recently been joined in the UK by his partner, also a PhD scientist, on a high skilled work visa. The couple just learned about the UK's unmarried partner visa, but are put off by the cost. They may relocate to the EU when his current job ends.

## Interim Recommendations

These early findings allow us to make some preliminary policy recommendations that would help our participants:

- Simplify and clarify the family immigration rules.
  - Couples should not have to invest so much time, energy and stress, or engage lawyers, to apply successfully.
- Reduce excessive visa application fees and the health surcharge.
- Clarify the frequency of permitted visa-free visits, to remove uncertainty and guess-work.
- Permit in-country applications by visitors (or at least make clear that this option is not available).
- Reduce the Minimum Income Requirement, and make it more flexible.
- Reinstate provision for immediate settlement for established families of those returning after living abroad.
- Ensure availability of low-cost immigration advice services – beyond the EUSS.