

We're still waiting for answers! Respond to children's questions on Brexit

Brexit has specific implications for children, not least because children within the UK and across the EU will live with the long term consequences of Brexit negotiations. As this child asks:

"Should the decision be made by the youth of Britain (people who are going to live in the country that is left)?"

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child clearly states that children have a right to information about decisions that affect them, to have their views taken into account, and to receive opportunities for ongoing dialogue on how their views are having an influence on decision making¹. However, children² have had few opportunities to raise questions and influence Brexit negotiations. Young people who have been consulted have expressed concerns about the lack of feedback, action and information³.

There are tried and tested methods through which children can contribute to local, national and supranational decision-making – through participatory research; passing ideas up through participation structures; direct representation to decision makers, including internationally; and, through on-line forums and videos⁴. This briefing contains questions and concerns raised by children through these methods⁵. Children have asked for:

- **Ongoing opportunities to be heard and for their views and concerns to be taken into account in the Article 50 negotiations.**
- **Production of information designed with and for them, so that their questions are answered and they receive feedback about the influence their views have had.**
- **Protection of their rights, underpinned by a child rights impact assessment by the EU and UK**

The areas highlighted by children, demonstrate the breadth of their concerns⁶: 1) Information, Influence on Decision Making and Dialogue; 2) The Economy, Employment and Poverty; 3) Education and Opportunities; 4) Borders and Discrimination; 5) Rights and Laws; and 6) The Environment.

In this document, *questions written in blue were written directly by children and young people aged 15 or under in the North of England.* Questions highlighted in bold were selected as the most important by a group of children ahead of their lobbying in the European Parliament, on November 20th 2017.

¹ <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/AdvanceVersions/CRC-C-GC-12.pdf>

² For the purpose of this briefing we use the word children to refer to children and young people aged up to 18 years. A small number of young people in the UK have had some opportunities to voice concerns. For an overview see Laura Lundy and colleagues' work in section 7 of <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/resources-and-publications/making-brexit-work-for-children>. These consultations rarely included children aged under 18, and even fewer opportunities have been given to younger children.

³ British Youth Council Draft Briefing (publication due Dec 2017)

⁴ Larkins, C. (2011) 'Can the EU live up to the expectations of its child citizens?' *International Journal of Children's Rights Special Issue: Children and the European Union*, Vol. 19(3), 451-476.

⁵ This briefing has been prepared by The Centre at UCLan on behalf of children who are representing their views and the views of others at a meeting with MEPs and a member of the Article 50 negotiating team. The questions come from 32 children aged 3-16 and 4 young people aged 17-20 and were raised in three N. England briefing events about participation and Brexit. This briefing also draws on young people's concerns shared through a song spontaneously created in the North of England, videos shown at a Children in Wales Brexit event, and the British Youth Council online consultation and discussions with more than 1000 children and young people (aged 11-25) and children and young people's concerns proposed for the UK Youth Parliament debate on Nov 10th 2017.

⁶ This reflects the fact that the EU has enacted over 80 legal instruments that confer direct entitlements for children http://ec.europa.eu/justice/fundamental-rights/files/acquis_rights_of_child.pdf, most aspects of EU policy affect children's lives in some way (see Larkins 2011) and considerable funding and expertise from the EU have been targeted to promote the rights of children.

1. Information, Influence on Decision Making and Dialogue

“Why don’t I get a say in MY generation’s future? Why don’t we (under 18s) have a say in our future? Why were the young people in our country not properly included in the decision to leave the EU?”

“In a country that is desperately craving certainty and constancy more than ever, why is no one political party of leader being upfront or even answering simple questions that we as citizens have a right to know the answer to? Why are we being kept in the dark?”

“How was it allowed and what will be done about the lies told during the Brexit vote (for example the £350bn that the NHS would gain)?”

“What is the overall gist of Brexit? What does Brexit mean? What does it mean for the younger generations of the country including our generation? How much will Brexit affect under 18s? How will it affect the next generation?”

“Hasn’t the decision to have Brexit only been brought upon [us] by a referendum won by a majority vote to leave made by older people who value patriotism over change and what is best for our country?”

“How much does it cost the UK to be part of the EU anyway?”

“After Brexit will the UK ever be able to join the EU again?”

“Why did people decide to leave the EU? Why does the UK want to leave the EU?”

“At the end of the day, Prime Minister May will be the one to negotiate Brexit on behalf of our country. What happens if they aren’t ready to do this by the deadline? Is there still a possibility that Brexit will not happen?”

The top recommendation from children involved in this briefing, also seen in the BYC consultations, is for accessible, clear, non-biased information, especially in the wake of what they have described as false promises about rebuilding the welfare state. Immediate action is needed so that information is produced by and for children that give clear answers to all of their questions. Ongoing action is also needed to enable both children and young people to input into negotiations and receive feedback on the impact of their views.

2. The Economy, Employment and Poverty

Children raised concerns about people having enough food and secure housing. The song written by young people, played at the start of today’s event, represents a sense of devastation and concern about the future (the sun-scorched stony road of Brexit and the availability of food). Young people in the North East of England have also expressed concerns about the closure of factories and loss of jobs. And across the UK there is concern for job prospects and the end to funding in disadvantaged communities. In the British Youth Council (BYC) survey children and young people reported concerns about the economy in general.

“Why is Brexit a thing and who will benefit from it? Is there a benefit to big companies or rich families or the government in monetary value?”

“How much are the Brexit negotiations costing the UK tax payer? Will the economic benefits – if there are any – eventually cancel out this debt?”

“In Britain we are already in a lot of debt in our economy. Will leaving the EU completely ruin our economy even further?”

“Will Brexit cause a decrease in imported products?”

“Will it make holidays to Europe more expensive?”

“Many industries will suffer heavily in the process of Brexit for example publishing. What is being done to safeguard these things that are needed to maintain the standard of living in our country?”

3. Education and Educational Projects

Children involved in this briefing and the BYC consultations have asked for a continuation of and commitment to youth funding e.g. Erasmus+. They need assurances that student mobility and funding will be protected.

“Will young people’s right to study abroad be affected?”

“Would we be able to attend European Universities with ease, post Brexit?”

“Will Brexit benefit me when I at University (e.g. money, cost, tuition fees)?”

Young people involved in this briefing also asked about funding for specific learning, research and participation activities which they have been involved in.

“I am perfectly aware that Brexit is happening soon, and when that does happen the budget and resources will be gone. How is this going to be remedied? Once we leave the EU we will lose access to all of those grants.”

“Will we still be part of it? Even though we won’t be part of it will we still have the opportunity to be part of the plan and the opportunities to have our views heard”

4. Borders and Discrimination

“Will we still be part of the EEA?”

“Scotland should be independent and it shouldn’t be forced to leave the EU! Little stupid England... “

“Will my friend’s cousin still be able to come and see her?”

In videos, young people have also expressed concern about the rise in hate speech that has occurred in the wake of the Brexit referendum. Young people raised concerns that:

Just because we are leaving the EU doesn’t mean people have the right to be racist

They want to know what will be done to make sure that Britain remains a welcoming place for all Europeans. This was also a concern raised in the BYC consultations. Young people were keen to emphasise the positives of migration and freedom of movement, and in Wales some young people stressed the vital importance of EU workers in delivering Public Sector Services. Freedom of movement in Europe, protections for migrants and the impact for those on the Irish border and the Northern Ireland peace process are also significant concerns⁷. Some of these concerns relate to very fundamental questions of identity, how children feel they are seen by others and the risks of creating divisions within communities and families. The song we played also revealed young people’s concern about future isolation of the UK as a whole. In the UK youth parliament debate young people have also called for a curriculum for life which would include citizenship and community cohesion. One of the top recommendations chosen through the British Youth Council is that freedom of movement should be maintained.

5. Rights and Laws

Children expressed concern about the protection of the rights of children, of human right in general, as well as economic, family and environmental rights. Children wanted assurances that children’s rights provided under the UN Convention on the Children and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights will be protected and the risk that children’s rights may not be thought about in every decision is shocking. Young people involved in the British Youth Council consultation stressed the importance of adopting a human rights based approach to refugees.

“What happens to laws? Do we get to make our own laws now? If not people have voted for nothing.”

“What are the advantages and disadvantages of leaving the EU in terms of laws and rights?”

“What will the effect be on trafficking in the UK as most lawyers use EU legislation for defending victims to get justice for them?”

⁷ See <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/what-we-do/resources-and-publications/making-brexit-work-for-children>

Children and young people in this briefing are calling for a children's rights impact assessment to make sure that all aspects of the Article 50 withdrawal proposals are checked against international standards to ensure that any proposals voted through will protect respect and promote all aspects of children's rights. The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights has provided children with some additional recourse to protection for their economic, social and family rights⁸. There is currently a risk that the UK will exclude the Charter when it is adopting other aspects of EU law, thereby undermining an aspect of current children's rights provision.

6. The Environment

Children and young people are affected by potential fracking in local areas and they have concerns that Brexit may mean lowering environmental protections. The concern for continued environmental protection was also mentioned in the BYC consultation.

"How will leaving the EU affect Britain's environmental policies?"

"Will Brexit cause a decrease in renewable energy funding?"

"How will Brexit affect the car industry and car regulations (eg emissions?)?"

"Why should we get rid of our best deterrent, trident?"

Call to Action at EU Level

Within the UK, children's rights experts and organisations have produced a briefing⁹ and formed a coalition to coordinate their responses to these issues, and amendments¹⁰ have been tabled to the proposed legislation on EU withdrawal to try to ensure that children's rights and interests are considered. These recommendations are aimed at EU level action within the Brexit negotiations to protect, respect and promote the rights and well-being of UK and other EU member state children living inside and outside of the EU.

1. The EU should produce clear responses to these and ongoing questions raised by children. Provide them and their representative organisations with answers regarding how their concerns have been taken into account so that these messages are clearly, effectively and widely communicated via media, including television. Set up a platform for dialogue with children concerning Article 50 that demonstrates how their views are being taken into account.
2. The European Council and EU Negotiators should ensure that a child rights impact assessment is undertaken on the proposals, to make sure that the rights and interests of children in the UK and in other EU countries are protected, respected and promoted.
3. MEPS (in the UK and other EU member states) should seek out and represent the views of children in their constituencies and represent these views to promote children's interests and rights in the negotiations and debate on the Article 50 withdrawal¹¹.

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⁸ See briefing to be launched 20.11.17 by Children in Scotland and CRAE link not yet available

http://www.eurochild.org/fileadmin/public/05_Library/Thematic_priorities/01_Childrens_Rights/Eurochild/Applying_the_EU_Charter_of_Fundamental_Rights_to_children_s_rights_in_the_EU.pdf

⁹ <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/what-we-do/resources-and-publications/making-brex-it-work-for-children>

¹⁰ https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/2017-2019/0005/amend/euwithdrawal_rm_cwh_1019.15-21.html

¹¹ The Centre for Children and Young People's Participation has worked in participatory projects with children across Europe can provide guidance on how to achieve this.