**Freedom of Movement – communication challenges and possible solutions**

**Mark English (personal views, not those of European Movement UK)**

**Introduction**

One reason anti-EU politicians and media were able to misrepresent the freedom of movement of people (FoM) so easily was because it did raise genuine problems in the UK. It is easier for unscrupulous operators to get away with exaggeration and misinformation than with pure invention.

Pro-Europeans cannot wish away the difficulties. Brexiteers hold up ending FoM as perhaps their biggest ‘triumph’ – and this message likely still holds some resonance for many voters. So whether pro-Europeans are arguing that Brexit has deprived British people of valuable rights, backing the return of free movement as a good thing in itself, or (ultimately) taking part in a future campaign to rejoin the EU, we must:

* Emphasise the benefits of FoM (and how they outweigh the challenges);
* Point to how the end of free movement has had negative effects for most Brits, not only for the minority of UK citizens that worked, studied or retired long-term in the EU or would do so if free movement returned;
* Be prepared to counter the attack lines from the other side.

We cannot afford to use misleading lines or outright falsehoods as Leave did. First, because it is wrong and undermines democracy. Second, because political lies often come back to bite those responsible, as Brexiteers are now finding out. Third, we do not have a colluding mass right-wing media behind us, but against us and intent on blasting holes in what we say.

But where we should follow Leave’s example is in combining emotional and factual messaging with appeals to rational self-interest.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Here is a more detailed list of ‘free movement communication challenges’, followed by some ways of overcoming those challenges.

**Challenges in communicating Freedom of Movement of People**

**1/ Imbalance in the numbers**

It was not one-way traffic. But there was a major imbalance between Brits moving abroad under FoM and Europeans coming to UK. In 2017, Eurostat figures said [about 800 000 Brits were officially resident in the EU](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/articles/livingabroad/april2018), a figure steady for some time. The real number was higher as some did not register and/or split their time between the UK and other EU countries. The UN put the figure at 1.3 million, but that included EU citizens born in the UK. The real figure is unlikely to have been below one million or over 1.5 million (so maximum about 2% of the UK population).

Meanwhile, official figures put the number of EU citizens resident in the UK at over 3 million. The fact that [6.7 million EU citizens applied for settled status](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/eu-settlement-scheme-quarterly-statistics-june-2022/eu-settlement-scheme-quarterly-statistics-june-2022#:~:text=3.-,Applications%20to%20the%20EU%20Settlement%20Scheme,30%20June%202022%20was%20647%2C150.) shows that the real figure was much higher, even though some of those applicants were probably not genuinely resident.

The UK had no functional counting system or registration procedure. But **somewhere between three and five times as many EU citizens were residing in the UK at the time of Brexit as UK citizens residing in the EU**. This imbalance might be somewhat less if FoM returned, because Central and Eastern European countries have got richer and provide more opportunities at home, while the UK has stood still and its reputation as a welcoming host country has been damaged. But there is little doubt that more EU citizens would still be coming to UK than UK citizens moving to Europe.

**2/ History, geography and psychology**

[150m EU residents live in internal EU border regions](https://epthinktank.eu/2018/07/15/people-living-in-border-regions-what-europe-does-for-you/) and far more have family ties in those regions. The UK is an island, so people are less used to moving and working across borders.

Eurobarometer surveys show that [huge percentages of EU27 citizens back FoM – 85% most recently](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5Cmarke%5CDownloads%5CEurobarometer_Standard_98_Winter_2022-2023_data_annex_en.pdf) (see P63 here) - and that 54% see it as one of the EU’s three greatest achievements (see P81-85, same link). This shows that many EU citizens value free movement as a principle and/or as bringing them indirect benefits, [even if they do not themselves intend to take advantage of it to work abroad](https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/news/who-benefits-from-the-eus-free-movement-of-labour/).

Many people recognise the general economic benefits FoM brings to their country, whether from incoming workers filling vacancies and paying taxes or outgoing workers learning new skills and remitting or investing some of their earnings at home. But a strong psychological pull is also present especially in Eastern Europe, where people whose rights were trampled under totalitarianism now value having the same rights as their fellow EU citizens in the West. It is also still present for historical reasons in, for example, France and Germany, where millions died over hundreds of years in conflicts across closed borders.

These historical, geographical and psychological factors partly explain why Brits were - and are – less enthusiastic about free movement than most other Europeans and why only fairly limited sections of British society feel it is ‘for them’.

**3/ Languages**

About [two-thirds of people in the UK are either monolingual](https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/insight-articles/which-foreign-language) or speak English and another UK language. Many of those that are multilingual do not speak an EU language. If anything, [language learning in the UK is declining further](https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/15043/#:~:text=While%20there%20has%20been%20a,German%2C%20but%20also%20in%20Spanish.).

As a result, much employment in the EU is simply not open to most Brits, except - mostly relatively privileged - people who are fluent in one or more EU languages or have the skills for ‘top-end’ jobs where English alone is enough (e.g. in banks and multinationals).

It is not feasible to work in most jobs in healthcare, retail or hospitality – sectors which employ many EU citizens in the UK - without being at ease talking to customers and colleagues. Most low-skilled ‘non-verbal’ jobs such as labouring and fruit picking are unattractive to UK workers. And even if the ability to speak a host country’s language(s) is not needed for a job, it makes integration much easier - lacking that ability is a disincentive to move.

Conversely, [most EU citizens](https://www.statista.com/statistics/990547/countries-in-europe-for-english/) – and to all intents and purposes everyone under 30 from some countries – have good enough English to apply for a wide range of jobs in the UK, and to compete for jobs that can be done in English in other parts of the EU. Very often they speak other languages, too. Furthermore, young EU citizens have an additional incentive to work or study in the UK for a while: reaching an even higher level of linguistic ability is crucial to their employability back home. This does not apply to most young Brits (or they think it does not!)

**4/ UK Labour market and welfare system**

The UK has a flexible labour market, with lower direct taxes than, for example, France and Germany. There are major pull factors. At the ‘top’ end – such as the City and the tech sector – there is a high concentration of ‘prestige’ jobs and take home pay is very high.

At the lower-skilled end, jobs in care homes, retail and hospitality are easy to find, easy to leave and accessible (for better or worse!) without training – often not the case in the EU.

There is little demand from local British people for hard manual labour jobs in agriculture and construction and there is demand from employers to fill those jobs and to recruit ‘migrant’ workers with craft skills, especially from countries well-reputed in those fields.

It is a tabloid myth that EU free movement rules required the UK to pay out of work benefits to people arriving from the EU. But the UK, more than most EU countries, has a welfare system that compensates for low wages – and in effect subsidises employers who pay low wages – through in work benefits (tax credits and now as part of Universal Credit). EU rules do require EU citizens in work to be treated equally with host country citizens. This means that under FoM, taxpayers’ money went to employed ‘EU migrants’ from day one. It would do so again if free movement returned….an open goal for xenophobic right-wing media.

The UK has a completely decentralised pay bargaining system, as opposed to sectoral collective bargaining as in Germany or the Nordic countries, where many categories of private sector workers are paid on national/regional scales. This means they cannot be undercut - or even perceive themselves as being undercut. In the UK before Brexit, there were legion anecdotal stories of employers preferring EU workers to Brits because they would accept lower wages. Many of these were untrue. At a macro level there is strong evidence that free movement did not in general lead to reduced wages. Indeed, the current system of high non-EU migration might present a greater risk. But these attack stories were effective and would resurface in any future debate on FoM.

**5/ Lack of registration and enforcement**

The UK has no ID cards (making registration of EU citizens almost impossible to enforce and an accurate grasp of numbers impossible to achieve) as well as an inadequate system of workplace and housing inspection. This meant that local people could not be confident that operators were not exploiting EU workers, accommodating them in insanitary conditions and/or using them to undercut UK workers.

**6/ The power of ‘take back control’ messaging**….

Repeated polling concludes that most people in the UK are not opposed to immigration, but do want it to be ‘controlled’. The powerful myth exists that Brexit provides that control and this myth will continue to be employed against those arguing for FoM.

**Tackling the communication challenges FoM brings**

All the suggestions below would need to be refined by detailed polling and message testing.

One-size fits all messaging won’t work. Supporters of FoM need to ‘segment’, focusing on different aspects for different target groups.

In every case, advocates for FoM should use engaging ‘story based’ content focusing on real life impacts on individuals and (preferably small) business.

**Outgoing free movement**

**Outgoing FoM for work**

***“If you’re in an area where people don’t travel, that doesn’t mean anything to them. They’re like: ‘well so what? What have I lost then’?”***

As this quote from a European Movement activist in the book “The Failure of Remain” (Adam Fagan and Stijn van Kessel, 2023, P125) illustrates, there is no point in telling large swathes of the UK population they should support FoM because they can work abroad. Many can’t, don’t want to and don’t know anyone who does.

Neither will vague emotional messaging about “feeling European” work with the [significant proportion of the UK population – including many who voted Remain - who feel their identity as overwhelmingly British, English and/or linked with a non-European diaspora](https://www.businessinsider.com/british-dont-think-they-are-european-2016-4?r=US&IR=T). That would take generations to change.

And this argument probably cannot be won by focusing on numbers, given that UK citizens moving to the EU were vastly exceeded by arrivals in the UK.

For some target audiences, those supporting the return of FoM should deploy emotionally resonant stories of British individuals and families, from as wide a range of age groups and social backgrounds as possible, who did use free movement to work or study.

There is scope for messages on reciprocity/fairness, [as various polling has shown](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/freedom-of-movement-leavers-remainers/). These concepts do have emotional resonance, perhaps more so if allied to messaging appealing to British pride – saying overtly or implicitly that UK citizens cannot be second class citizens in Europe.

FoM backers should also remember that FoM for work is not only about living in EU countries but also about being able to provide services without barriers and red tape. Many services businesses – such as IT contractors – are now unable to seek custom in the EU, as they cannot provide the personnel to make short trips to service equipment, provide training, etc. Again, real-life stories on this are plentiful.

The effect on cultural industries – and audiences - of losing FoM for performers also provides an opportunity to mobilise, for example, musicians and actors and harness their celebrity power.

**Outgoing FoM for leisure**

The negative impact on leisure travel from losing FoM personally affects vastly more British people, from a wider range of social backgrounds, than the loss of the right to work in the EU. The [EU recorded 67 million visits from the UK in 2019](https://www.statista.com/statistics/569263/visits-to-the-eu-by-united-kingdom-uk-residents/#statisticContainer). The new barriers and inconveniences have a high media profile, with queues at Dover and at airports. Furthermore, delays will get worse with the introduction of new electronic Schengen entry/exit and visa waiver systems. The latter will also mean Brits having to pay for the right to enter the EU. The sum involved will be small – perhaps €7 per person for three years. But this is very powerful as a symbol of loss of rights and of isolation and provides important communication opportunities.

For many, a painfully direct experience is losing pet passporting. The once easy process of taking a pet to the EU is now [an expensive bureaucratic hurdle](https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8667/CBP-8667.pdf). Pet owners are potentially a major target group. They want their previous rights back and are potential supporters of bringing back FoM.

Retiring to the sun is an aspiration resonant for many people, even if they do not end up doing it. Focusing on the loss of the right to do so easily in the EU could convince some wavering voters to back FoM. The 90 days in 180 days limit to presence in the EU that the loss of FoM creates for British second home owners is also a potential focus for carefully targeted messaging, though it obviously will not resonate with the mass of the UK population who do not have the means for a second home.

**Incoming free movement**

The pro-FoM camp has much more scope to make a positive case on inward free movement than in 2016. Campaigners can talk about free movement helping to fill labour shortages – for example of lorry drivers – that have restricted the availability of food and caused rising prices. Businesses can tell their own stories about the benefits they would get from having FoM back and could pass on to customers. There are plenty of stories about EU citizens who have created employment, driven scientific progress or become cultural figures in the UK.

Anti-FoM arguments, meanwhile, have been partly neutralised by reality. Voters have seen that the absence of FoM has not led to a higher standard of living, lower pressure on public services or to lower immigration. We can point out that even when FoM applied, most of the time most migration to Britain was from outside the EU and therefore a matter for national rules, not EU ones. We should be careful to avoid stigmatising non-EU migration relative to inward mobility under FoM. But it is legitimate to point out that the government has, in essence, now chosen to increase non-EU migration to make up for the fact there are no longer as many EU citizens coming in as the UK needs.

Currently, we have both higher immigration – without the flexibility provided by FoM to both employers and workers – and labour shortages contributing to supply chain difficulties and to inflation. Businesses wanting to recruit are faced with increased red tape and delays.

The NHS in particular has lost many key workers. It has over [4000 fewer EU doctors and 29 000 fewer nurses than it would have without Brexit](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/nov/27/brexit-worsened-shortage-nhs-doctors-eu). We have seen how effective (false) NHS based messaging was for Leave, now there are huge opportunities to get the truth about the situation out there. NHS themes lend themselves both to emotional messages and to those appealing to self-interest. We can also link staffing pressures caused by the loss of FoM with funding pressures from lower tax revenues, also caused by Brexit. These themes are prominent in this [European Movement UK video and web page](https://www.europeanmovement.co.uk/ten_ways_brexit_disaster_nhs), for example.

Just as with outward FoM, we should highlight how the return of FoM would solve problems Brexit has created for leisure/educational travel into the UK. The most obvious is the requirement for EU visitors – even if part of a school party - to have a full EU passport. There are some signs that this is [discouraging adults from visiting and educational travel has almost dried up](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/apr/08/french-and-german-tourists-turn-their-back-on-brexit-britain). This is depriving European young people of the chance to visit the UK and depriving the UK of soft power benefits. It is a big economic hit on tour operators, hotels, host families, guides and language schools. Young British people have lost the opportunity to take part in school exchanges with EU countries.

Inward long-term student mobility, however, is more complex. The fact that EU students no longer pay the same university fees as UK ones and that more non-EU students are coming has meant that [fee revenue for universities has increased significantly since Brexit](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/may/16/international-students-boosted-uk-economy-by-42bn-in-20212-study). For certain audiences, we can highlight the loss of opportunities for UK students to study in the EU, but this will not be of interest to everyone. The Erasmus exchange programme is only partially effective as an argument given that many non-EU countries take part without free movement and the EU invited the UK to do so.

**Government policy options**

We should highlight – when attacked by opponents – measures, beneficial in themselves, that governments should take to mitigate challenges created by FoM. For example:

* investment in public services using the extra tax revenue FoM brings in, both directly from EU workers and indirectly from higher economic growth;
* labour market and welfare reforms aiming to raise low wages, better enforce the minimum wage and prevent employers housing migrants in insalubrious conditions;
* a better system for recording the number of workers, students and dependents coming in under FoM (though there will be constraints on this as long as the UK has no ID card system);
* properly applying the conditionality attached to free movement, though this must be addressed with caution, given that a) in practice before Brexit, only minimal numbers of ‘EU migrants’ were ever in position where it might have been legal for the UK to remove them b) when EU Member States have sought to remove people, there have been suspicions of breaching EU law and of discrimination. The European Commission has taken legal action against [Belgium](https://blogs.kent.ac.uk/eu-rights-clinic/).

**Showing FoM sceptics Europe is good for them**

Finally, polling may show that some population groups, for example in less prosperous towns in Northern England, are, for all the reasons described above, simply not susceptible to positive arguments about FoM in isolation. In order to influence them in a pro-EU direction, it would be necessary to focus instead on general economic arguments, notably the cost of living, where the baleful effects of Brexit are obvious in everyday life. Even people who do not actively welcome FoM might accept its return if they see that on balance EU membership is favourable to them and their families.

**Conclusion**

Communication on FoM in the UK is challenging, and needs to be segmented, based on data and on polling different target groups. Messaging needs to combine emotion, facts and rational self-interest. Given the increasingly obvious negative effects of Brexit, to which the loss of FoM has contributed directly and significantly, there is every reason to believe that:

1. the active support of a large proportion of UK voters for FoM can be achieved;
2. even those who are not convinced on this specific point will in future see the benefits of EU membership overall as outweighing their doubts about FoM.

***Mark English*** *is now Policy Adviser to European Movement UK and was Head of Media at the European Commission office in London from 2011-18. He spent more of that time dealing with freedom of movement than with any other issue.*

1. ‘Take back control’ was primarily emotional messaging. Referring to the numbers of EU citizens estimated to be resident in the UK was factual messaging. Claiming that NHS queues would be shorter if FoM ended was an appeal to rational self-interest, though based on false premises. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)