

Local and Regional Dimension of EU–UK Relations Post-Brexit

Executive summary

This document presents the results of a dedicated survey on the obstacles to and priorities for EU-UK cooperation from a local/regional perspective, conducted in January 2026 and disseminated through the CoR-UK Contact Group. Local and regional actors on both sides report that cooperation continues but with persistent friction in four main areas: short-stay mobility and people-to-people exchanges; loss of access to former EU territorial and sectoral cooperation programmes; heavier administrative burdens and regulatory divergence; and reduced partner capacity.

Respondents overwhelmingly view a stronger subnational voice in the governance structures of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) and input to the Parliamentary Partnership Assembly (PPA) as essential and call for more transparency and practical, joint guidance. Quick-win fixes (e.g., short-stay mobility solutions and small-grants) and medium-term measures (e.g., light-touch legal templates and revived territorial cooperation instruments) could rapidly unblock cooperation across culture, research and innovation, youth, trade and connectivity.

Top obstacles cited include visa/mobility constraints; loss of access to former EU programmes; financial/administrative burdens; reduced partner capacity; loss of legal frameworks; and divergent rules for public authorities.

Most affected domains in terms of continued cooperation between the EU and UK concern transport links; research & innovation; cultural & educational cooperation; tourism; environmental management; health/emergency cooperation; and funding access.

Subnational representation in TCA-related bodies (incl. PPA) is seen as crucial/important by the majority of respondents, while stakeholder understanding is commonly rated poor to moderate.

Findings of the survey

Main issues raised by respondents

1) Mobility and people-to-people links

Barriers to short-term movement (visas/permits, group travel formalities, equipment transit) are the single most immediate obstacle. Multiple replies refer to halted youth exchanges and cultural touring, fewer school trips, and higher costs for artists and performers moving people and kit across borders. Some respondents also note that labour mobility for trainees still requires working visas, adding another layer of complexity to short-stay exchanges.

2) Programmes and funding gaps

Withdrawal from Interreg and other EU cooperation instruments is widely described as a structural loss. Respondents document stalled or stopped projects (e.g., Interreg 2 Seas legacy) and the absence of equivalent replacement instruments. Cultural and education sectors cite negative impacts from the loss of Creative Europe/Erasmus+ participation; devolved evidence (Wales/Scotland) underscores the development role Cohesion Policy played and today's lack of external funding to underwrite cross-border work. Respondents further comment that the lack of access to cooperation funding forces high investments in border control infrastructure. It is suggested to have a specific debate on future cooperation, including relating to Interreg, during a PPA meeting.

3) Administrative burdens and regulatory divergence

Authorities and businesses point to customs/sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) procedures, conformity assessments, rules of origin, and limited mutual recognition as drivers of cost and delay—especially for SMEs and perishable goods. Evidence submitted to parliamentary committees calls for simplified joint guidance, targeted mutual recognition, and closer standards cooperation. Scottish local authorities flag pressures on Environmental Health services (e.g., Export Health Certificates), while welcoming SPS arrangements that could reduce paperwork.

4) Partner capacity constraints and uneven understanding

Reduced partner capacity (staff, skills, budgets) and uneven stakeholder understanding—often rated “poor” to “moderate”—limit engagement. SMEs, civil society, youth groups and smaller public bodies are most affected. Respondents ask for plain-language, sector-specific guidance and dedicated support to manage project design, customs, procurement and funding eligibility. Some administrations explicitly cite financial and human resource constraints as primary barriers.

Governance and transparency

Most contributors see subnational representation in TCA-related bodies (including the PPA) as crucial or important, and urge structured channels for local/regional input. Calls are made for better transparency of TCA governance—e.g., publishing agendas of TCA governance structures (such as the Partnership Council and specialized committees) in advance and timely minutes—to enable meaningful engagement. Devolved and regional authorities stress that many policy fields covered by EU–UK agreements are implemented locally, making territorial input indispensable.

Sectoral and geographic specific considerations

Transport/connectivity - Practical issues include intermediate high-speed rail stops and border sanitary checks; ports with high UK-EU traffic and remembrance tourism remain sensitive to immigration formalities. Fisheries actors report that post-Brexit cooperation is increasingly difficult to monitor, and local initiatives to rebuild consultation often go unrecognised.

Research & innovation - Uncertainty and administrative drag impede university–municipal and SME collaboration; momentum is lost where Interreg previously enabled pilots.

Culture, education, youth - Repeated instances of stalled school trips/exchanges and touring; calls for pragmatic mobility solutions and clearer guidance.

Island of Ireland - References to North/South project impacts and limited scope of cooperation instruments for councils beyond PEACE PLUS.

Gibraltar - The TCA does not apply; the forthcoming EU–UK agreement on Gibraltar focuses on movement of persons and will shape future cooperation.

Local workarounds: the Straits Committee¹ sustains ties via small grants, but partners stress the need for larger-scale, predictable funding to reach pre-Brexit levels.

Areas for improvement (opportunities and practical fixes)

- Enable short-stay mobility: establish light-touch pathways for youth exchanges, cultural touring, researchers and municipal staff (e.g., streamlined permits/waivers, clearer group-travel rules, predictable equipment transit).
- Restore/mirror territorial cooperation: create an Interreg-style facility (EU–UK or bilateral) for small/medium bottom-up projects with multi-annual envelopes, with special attention to Channel/North Sea and Irish contexts.
- Reduce red tape with joint guidance: commission concise, co-branded how-to guides for LRAs/SMEs on customs, SPS, rules of origin, standards/conformity assessment and touring logistics; explore targeted mutual recognition and regulator cooperation.

¹ An informal partnership between local authorities in France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Kent in the UK.
<https://www.straitscommittee.eu/>

- Create structured subnational input: for instance regular LRA hearings/evidence windows feeding into the PPA and Partnership Council, with transparent agendas and timely minutes.
 - Rebuild capacity and match partners: offer a lightweight helpdesk for customs/procurement/eligibility and partner-matching; publish template MoUs, data-sharing and joint-procurement clauses.
 - Sector-specific pilots: transport (intermediate stops on the high-speed rail; border sanitary processes), research & innovation (bridge funds; IPR/customs guides; short-term staff mobility), culture/education/tourism (touring facilitation; school-exchange vouchers; centralised permit advice), and bespoke solutions for the island of Ireland and Gibraltar.
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- The **global policy areas** seen as most relevant for EU–UK cooperation at local and regional level are, in order of frequency: climate action and energy transition, followed by international trade, biodiversity & ocean protection, security & defence, urban resilience and digital governance, with civil protection/disaster management also featuring prominently.