

## What Brexit Means to Kensington People

In a borough where 16 per cent of the population are EU nationals, the political mishandling of Brexit has a huge human cost, writes EMMA DENT COAD MP

By [Emma Dent Coad](#)

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*Soon after the referendum in the summer of 2016, an elderly French woman came into my councillors' surgery. She was distraught. She'd lived in London for nearly 50 years, worked here, paid her tax and was retired. She was convinced that she could be sent home, where she had no surviving family, and wanted my reassurance.*

I couldn't give it.

In the past few months there have been hours of rhetoric, bombast, backstops, locks on backstops and occasionally some good sense spoken in the House of Commons. I've played my part but still have no reassurance to give in relation to how Brexit could affect the good people of Kensington — those who live, work or study in the extraordinary constituency I represent.

White British-born people like me comprise a minority of Kensington's population, just under 48 per cent. The majority of 52 per cent are made up of people from all corners of the earth, all races, religions and cultures, some born here, some settled for decades, some more recently arrived, and some here temporarily, for work or study.

Kensington has 16 per cent of EU nationals, an incredible 19,000. The majority are French (ca6,500), then Italians (ca4,500), Germans and Spanish people around 2,500 each and Portuguese (ca1,500.) The remainder are a glorious mix of "others."

That's 19,000 people I feel responsible for but still have no good answers for, particularly in the case of a "no deal" Brexit.

A lot of Eastern Europeans work but don't live in the constituency, but I worry about them too. Every day thousands of EU nationals come into Kensington to work in our hospitals, care homes and clinics, hotels, bars, pubs, restaurants, offices and shops. They are the engine room and front desk of the busy and vibrant machine of Kensington's business. We need them.

Across the borough of Kensington and Chelsea, in 2015, we had 26,000 wholesale and retail workers, 19,000 working in accommodation and food service, 16,000 in health and social care. No stats are available on precise figures from the EU, but anecdotally a lot certainly are.

So it is a huge concern that many of our EU nationals, faced with a very uncertain future,

have begun to make the difficult decision to return to their home country or move elsewhere.

The French Lycee in South Kensington tells me it has lost valuable teaching staff. Cafes have said they are getting short of staff, many of whom are EU students. Some of our construction sites are struggling, having lost highly skilled Eastern European workers. And the council has said it is short of 1,100 home care workers.

Why have they gone?

It wasn't until a year after the ill-fated referendum in June 2016 that the government announced arrangements for EU nationals.

The process is far from perfect. The statement was a long-awaited assurance that EU nationals living legally in the UK will not have to return when we leave the EU in March 2019, but those who have already slogged through an 85-page application form and paid a fee will have to do so again. There are tight restrictions on family members wishing to join. If you have lived in the UK for five years, you will be entitled to claim settled status, as long as you haven't committed a crime. There are cut-off dates, thresholds and fees to negotiate, besides a less than perfectly functioning Home Office facing an onslaught of three million visa applications.

There are a lot of loose ends in relation to UK students travelling abroad for study or research and EU students studying or undertaking research here. I can't speak for the rest of the country but in London all these uncertainties have frightened off many foreign students and universities are battling each other for an ever-diminishing contingent of precious, full-fee-paying foreign students.

There are additional fears as to what may happen in the case of a "no deal" Brexit, which at first seemed far-fetched but may yet be a possibility. Not only colleges and universities but any organisation reliant on EU staff, customers or students is suffering a time of huge anxiety and this loss of confidence has sadly meant that businesses are struggling while we await the result of negotiations.

Leave or stay, under a good or poor deal, this is a time of massive anxiety for a constituency whose backbone is the mutual respect, tolerance and diversity of a population of which we are so rightly proud.

And politicians have let them down.

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