



What Did the EU Actually Do for Us?

Talk2EU Fact Sheet

A look at how EU programmes shaped everyday life in the UK, and what has changed since Brexit.

Facts. Impacts. Why it matters.

It's easy to forget the everyday ways in which EU membership has shaped life in the UK. Many of these benefits were quiet yet powerful, and their absence is still being felt by many.

Erasmus+ – Opportunities for Young People

What it was:

A funded EU programme enabling students, teachers, and volunteers to live, study, or work across Europe.

What it meant:

Over 200,000 people from the UK took part. It opened doors for young people from all walks of life, offering life experiences, language skills, and personal growth.

What's changed:

The UK replaced Erasmus+ with the Turing Scheme, but:

- It doesn't support EU students coming into the UK
- Participation is harder for smaller colleges and less predictable from year to year
- Long-term partnerships have broken down

The economic cost has been significant too:

- UK universities could lose over £62.5 million per year in tuition fees alone
- A 57% drop in EU students is projected in some areas
- Some institutions may lose over £1 billion in revenue if losses aren't offset
- Cumulative export revenue losses in higher education are estimated at £8.2 billion (2013–2017 trend)

Why?

- EU students now pay full international fees
- Visa rules have added hurdles
- Loss of EU funding (like Erasmus and research grants) makes UK studies less attractive

Impact on towns and universities:

- Fewer international students mean less income for housing, retail, food, and services
- Less cultural exchange on campuses
- More competition globally to attract students who once saw the UK as their first choice

Horizon Europe – Science & Innovation

What it was:

The EU's flagship science funding programme supports collaborative research in medicine, climate, energy, and technology.

What's changed (and improved):

After a long absence, the UK officially rejoined Horizon Europe in January 2024.

What does it mean now?

- UK researchers are once again part of Europe-wide scientific collaboration
- In 2024 alone, UK institutions secured nearly £500 million in Horizon grants
- Projects in areas like cancer research, robotics, and green tech resumed
- Confidence returned to universities and labs that had paused or lost funding

This shows what's possible when cooperation is rebuilt, even after difficult breakups.

The Single Market – Seamless Trade and Shared Rules

What it was:

A system that allowed goods, services, people, and capital to move freely between EU countries, with no tariffs, no border delays, and shared rules.

What it meant:

- UK businesses could sell to EU customers without extra paperwork
- Shops could stock goods quickly and cheaply
- Farmers, fishers, and lorry drivers worked across borders with ease
- Consumers benefited from more choice and lower prices

What's changed:

- As the UK became a third country, it now has trade barriers, which have increased delays and costs
- Some medicines and specialist products have been harder to import
- Small businesses have struggled or stopped exporting entirely
- Food and goods prices have risen; often quietly, but sometimes noticeably

What Was Freedom of Movement?

Freedom of movement meant that UK citizens could live, work, study, and retire anywhere in the EU, without needing a visa or special permit.

What it offered:

- Brits could move to Spain, Germany, France, or 25 other countries and be treated like locals.
- Young people could take jobs or internships abroad easily.
- Retirees could settle in warmer climates without barriers.
- Families could move for opportunity, education, or quality of life — with access to healthcare, schools, and services.

What's changed:

UK citizens are now treated as third-country nationals in the EU. That means:

- Visa requirements or work permits for longer stays
- Health insurance and proof of income for residency
- Stricter rules for job-seekers or remote workers
- More paperwork for families relocating

Shared Standards – What We Had, and What We Risk Losing

The EU didn't just regulate trade, it protected shared values.

When the UK was part of the EU, the UK helped create and was protected by common standards for:

- Environmental protection (air, water, wildlife)
- Food and product safety
- Pesticide and chemical rules
- Animal welfare
- Workers' rights and workplace safety

What's changed?

These rules were copied into UK law after Brexit, but the UK is now free to change or remove them

- There is no automatic alignment with future EU improvements
- We could weaken protections without full public debate

Why it matters:

- Consumer trust may suffer
- Environmental and health standards could fall behind
- UK products may no longer meet EU rules, risking future trade complications

These standards weren't red tape; they were protections that ensured fairness, safety, and sustainability.

Regional Development Funds – Local Investment

What it was:

EU grants directed at areas with economic need to fund training, infrastructure, jobs, and regional growth.

What it meant:

Thousands of community projects received funding, from new roads and start-up grants to education and broadband access. Areas like Cornwall, South Wales, and the North East depended on this support.

What's changed:

The UK promised to match EU regional funding, but many local councils say:

- They've received less than before
- Applications are slower and less transparent
- Long-term planning has been disrupted

The Bigger Picture

With the benefit of time, we can reflect on what we had and what's changed:

- Student and academic opportunities are reduced
- Research was delayed, and teams disbanded
- Trade barriers have caused prices to rise, import charges, and mounting paperwork. They're not the only reason, but one of many
- Regional funding falling short
- Shared protections are no longer guaranteed

Everyday Protections the EU Helped Support

EU membership wasn't just about politics; it affected everyday life in many practical ways. From cleaner air to roaming charges, from academic funding to job protections, many UK benefits were tied to shared EU rules and collaboration.

Here are some of the areas where EU cooperation made a visible difference:

Environment & Health

- Clean beaches & bathing water thanks to EU standards
- Stronger air quality rules reduce health risks
- Climate leadership through joint carbon reduction targets

Public Safety

- Cross-border policing tools like the European Arrest Warrant
- Shared databases to tackle organised crime and trafficking

Workers' Rights

- Paid holiday leave (minimum 28 days including bank holidays)
- Equal pay protections and maternity rights
- Limits on excessive working hours under the EU Working Time Directive

Science & Research

- Joint research programmes like Horizon Europe
- Funding for innovation in medicine, tech, and sustainability
- Cross-border collaboration on health, energy, and transport

Education & Mobility

- Erasmus+ access for UK students
- Lower tuition for EU students coming to the UK (until 2021)
- Education partnerships across 28 countries

Trade, Investment & Consumer Rights

- No customs checks or tariffs in the Single Market
- Roaming-free mobile use across Europe
- EHIC healthcare access when travelling
- Stronger consumer protections on goods and services

Why This Matters

While some of these protections were kept after Brexit, others were reduced, replaced, or lost entirely. Understanding what was in place helps us reflect, not with regret, but with clarity. The kinds of relationships, rules, and standards we want for the future.

This isn't about nostalgia. It's about asking:

- What worked?
- What's missing now?
- What kind of future do we want to build and who with?

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This document was edited collaboratively, and we welcome feedback or corrections.

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