

# BRITISH CITIZENS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE EU REPORT OF A QUALITATIVE STUDY IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

AIMR

**T**his Synthesis presents the results of a group discussion held in London on 18 December 2013 on the subject of citizens' involvement in the European Union. It is part of a wider citizenship project managed by Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute, with the support of national partners of the European Qualitative Network coordinated by OPTEM, on behalf of the European Commission.

## Introduction

This report presents the results of a group discussion held in London on 18 December 2013 on the subject of citizens' involvement in the European Union.

It is the United Kingdom section of a pan-European qualitative study involving 18 of the member states.

In each country the study was carried out by the national partner of the European qualitative network coordinated by optem. In the United Kingdom by aimr.

This study forms a part of a wider citizenship project managed by Notre Europe - Jacques Delors institute on behalf of the European commission.

### BOX 1 ► Composition of the group of respondents

| Gender   | Age            |
|----------|----------------|
| Women: 5 | 20-34 years: 3 |
| Men: 4   | 35-49 years: 3 |
|          | 50-60 years: 3 |

#### Social class

Lower-middle social class: 4 (professions of head of household: stone mason, self-employed carpenter, police officer)

Higher-middle class: 5 (professions of head of household: teacher, scientist, quantity surveyor, finance director, business manager, office employee)

#### Political opinion

The respondents were also recruited so that diverse political opinions were represented in the group.

## 1. Initial thoughts about the European union

When invited to voice initial thoughts about the European Union **the following ideas spontaneously emerged:**

- Brussels
- Corruption
- "I'd like to get out of it"
- Free movement of people within the EU
- Immigration into the UK
- The euro - widely seen as an unsatisfactory currency and the source of problems within the EU
- Ukip (United Kingdom independence party) whose key policy is leaving the EU.

It should be noted that **all the initial thoughts were implicitly negative** and that no positive ideas about the EU emerged spontaneously.

With regard to **free movement of people/immigration**, there was concern about the strain on resources such as housing, education, access to medical care, etc. Furthermore, there were worries that there were/would be no controls on the numbers of immigrants coming to the UK.

The reference to **Brussels** signified the widespread belief in UK that the EU was seeking to dictate legislation in the UK. Furthermore there was a widely accepted belief that politicians and bureaucrats in Brussels were lining their own pockets and not governing Europe in an upright and honest fashion.

The **euro** reference recalled the financial instability in the EU and amongst particular countries which made the EU seem less secure/uncertain.

The **ukip** reference highlighted the appeal of this increasingly popular (right of centre) political party whose raison d'être is to get Britain out of Europe. The ukip stance is that if Britain left the EU then all of the country's problems would be solved.

Invited to identify **positives** of the EU the initial thought was that there "doesn't seem to be any". However, one younger, more educated respondent who was an executive in a multi-national observed that the **EU was a massive trade partner of the UK**.

*"If we come out (of the EU) it will have a massive (adverse) effect..."*

This view was challenged by an older ukip supporter who argued that even if we were out of the EU we could still trade with countries in the EU. He claimed that the loss of trade argument was simply "scare tactics."

**Freedom to travel in Europe** meant not having to show your passport. However this benefit was challenged by those who noted that they **did** have to show their passport when coming back into the UK. Further it was felt that more rigorous passport checks would help to stop rampant immigration by those not entitled to come to the UK.

Another positive was that **free movement of labour** allowed people into the country to do jobs that the indigenous population did not want to do.

*"Everybody sees it as people (only) coming here to take up benefits but that is not true".*

It has to be observed that initial interest in the positives and negatives of the EU was not especially thoughtful or knowledgeable amongst this sample. Rather attitudes to the EU largely reflected unsophisticated and basic attitudes towards "immigration" amongst people who felt that their **English locality** was **being overrun by foreigners** both from the EU and other parts of the world. Interestingly, there was a tendency to conflate EU and non-EU immigration into one common problem.

The plan to allow free movement of people from Bulgaria and Romania from 1 January 2014 has stoked up fears of being "swamped" by another

wave of uncontrolled immigration because of our EU membership.

*"The school i work in is only 10% English speaking. It is only going to get worse..."*

## 2. Sources of information and knowledge on the EU

**Spontaneously mentioned sources** were:

- National press: daily mail, sun, mirror, times etc.
- TV news and documentaries
- Observations from work as teacher, police officer, in business/commerce etc.
- Alleged first hand observation of "immigrants taking everything they can - taking up benefits and driving flash cars."
- Day to day conversations at work or when out and about etc. - this often reflected items read or seen/heard in the media including stories of:
  - Immigrants using NHS facilities;
  - Immigrants from EU and rest of world seeking to grab whatever benefits they could;
  - UK citizens/companies obeying EU laws regulations whilst other countries ignored them.

**Invited to identify more credible sources, respondents claimed that none could really be trusted.** In the press there was 'spin' in whatever you read which put forward the political agenda of that particular paper. It was observed that all media had their own agendas in what they wanted to communicate.

*"I would like to think the BBC was impartial in its reporting but I'm not sure".*

On balance, however, it was felt that **the press** was **mainly negative about the EU**. Specifically, it was noted that in the past those who raised objections to immigration used to be regarded as 'racists' but now it was mainstream and acceptable for doubts about further immigration and fears of being 'flooded' to be expressed.

**Likewise** it was felt that **radio and TV** including the BBC were **not balanced** in their view of the EU. Rather **the stories featured in the media about the EU tended to throw up negatives:**

- Immigrants grabbing benefits, using up scarce resources;
- EU law intruding on British customs/way of life
- Brussels bureaucracy, etc.

They could not recall any positive stories about the EU and its workings.

*"The media story about the EU focuses on its bad points. We don't get to hear anything good. The bad points make better stories – like the straight bananas one."*

**Politicians** were **mistrusted** as a reliable source of information about the EU or indeed any subject.

*"They just open their mouths and talk rubbish. They are all on the gravy train."*

### 3. Questions regarding the future of the EU

**Concerns about the future of the EU** were dominated by **the question of Britain's continued membership**.

Some asserted strongly that if a vote were held tomorrow people in the United Kingdom would unquestionably decide to leave. However, a minority felt that the general public's lack of knowledge about the advantages and disadvantages of membership made it difficult to make a judgment about the merits of membership.

The overall anti-EU stance of the group made respondents **reluctant or unable to come up with questions about the EU's future**.

*"We don't know enough to know what the future will be."*

**When pressed, the following questions emerged:**

- What good things are happening in Europe that will be of benefit to the UK
- What do we get from the EU that benefits us as a nation
- What have we gained as a result of being in the EU?

Respondents suspected that there probably was a positive story to tell about the EU, and this prompted requests for the benefits and achievements of EU membership to be publicised more widely and more effectively.

*"What have we gained? Bosch washing machines... that's what we want to know – the benefits need to be more publicised!"*

Awareness of specific issues relating to Europe's future was typically absent though there were some

references to what might happen to the prospects of the euro and the city of London as a financial centre.

It was observed that business, especially big business, seemed to be positive about Europe and it was assumed that the captains of industry and commerce could see the benefits. However, this was qualified by doubts about whether the interests of big business overlap with those of ordinary citizens.

### 4. Current means of expression of citizens' views

When asked how citizens can give their opinion and have their voice heard "as regards future directions of the European union", the respondents mainly declare that they **can vote**:

There was some confusion about means of expressing opinions about the future of EU.

Whilst **one or two** asserted that it could in theory be done via **the local MEP** others seemed **uncertain about whether they had an MEP for their area**. All claimed that they had not voted in the previous European parliament elections. They were surprised to hear that elections for the European parliament would take place in the spring of 2014.

The fact that respondents did not know the name of their MEP or the nature of his/her constituency was an initial barrier to making contact. Some recalled that they knew who their local member of parliament was and had seen him at local events. One respondent had actually been in touch with her local MP. However, **the existence and identity of their MEP largely remained a mystery**.

The ukip supporter saw the next general election as providing the opportunity for voters to express their pent up disillusion with the EU by voting for ukip and then getting a referendum on UK membership of the EU.

**Issues that they might raise** with their MEP included:

- More information about levels of **immigration** and whether UK citizens would get the same social benefits if they moved to other EU countries;

- **Reassurance about the EU economy as a whole** and what is being done to make sure that the **financial crisis** does not happen again.

It was observed that while politicians were meant to be the voice of the people they did not know what people were thinking. If British politicians were useless at representing their constituent's views then it was unlikely that European politicians would be any better.

## 5. Perceptions of new ways for citizens to get their voice heard

Ideas for expressing public opinion spontaneously mentioned included:

- **Demonstrations**, although it was felt that this was not really the British way of doing things;
- **Opinion polls**, but this would require publicity to ensure that people understood the importance of participation and to raise the status and credibility of the poll results. Furthermore people would want to see that British public opinion was taken note of in future policy decisions;
- **EU representatives going out into the community** talking to people and being more approachable. This could be done by local public meetings attended by MEPs and also by websites/internet and social media (Facebook, twitter, etc.).

It was observed that more traditional methods of communication (local papers, leaflets and posters) might be required to reach the older generation who were less into social media and the internet.

*"I don't do twitter and my mother doesn't even have a computer".*

There was an expectation of a **personal touch** with EU representatives available at meetings, etc. To answer questions from the general public.

It would be important that any public meetings were **local**. Respondents would not go as far as central London to attend a meeting. Meetings would also need to be well publicised so that people knew when and where they were happening.

A first stage in the process of getting people more in touch with EU/their MEP would be to promote awareness of the names and contact details of MEPs so people knew who to contact and how to reach them.

It was noted that since some people, in urban constituencies especially, did not speak English some means of reaching non-English speakers may need to be developed. It was noted that local authorities produce information leaflets in a range of different languages.

## 6. Assessment of several propositions for improved citizens' involvement

### A. An information service on the functioning of the EU and EU policies, comprising an information office open for the public in every large city, a web site, and a service quickly answering any questions asked by telephone, mail or email.

**Initial response to this idea was quite positive.** There was some uncertainty as to whether something like this was not already available.

It was envisaged that the central platform might be a website that would enable people to get the information they wanted alongside other elements of the service.

Respondents envisaged looking to this service to provide information on what the EU did for people in the UK.

**Less positively**, those with more jaundiced views of the EU suspected that the information service would be 'all spin'. Whilst respondents said they wanted objective facts they did not want to be told what they ought to think about the EU.

Overall this emerged as the idea with the most widespread appeal.

### B. Debates to be organised in major media between average citizens and experts of EU issues on the directions taken by the EU.

This idea attracted **some interest**.

Positively it recalled the TV show, question time, on BBC1 where a panel of politicians and public figures took questions on current affairs from a general public audience. TV viewers could see the general public getting involved in that sort of programme both by the questions they asked and their responses to what members of the panel had to say.

However, less positively respondents acknowledged that:

- They would not themselves wish to speak/ask questions;
- Currently they did not know enough to ask questions about the EU and its policies;
- In one programme there would not be sufficient time to cover all the issues;
- They would probably be too lazy to go along.

Overall this idea was rated first or second by around half the respondents.

### **C. Opinion polls on the EU organised regularly in the whole of Europe, allowing citizens to know both what their fellow countrymen and what the citizens of the other countries think.**

**This idea attracted interest across the group.** It was seen as interesting to know what other countries were thinking about the EU.

There was some debate as to whether the EU might not already be doing this kind of polling and if not, then why not. The cynical viewpoint was that the EU was already doing opinion polling but simply not telling citizens the results.

Positively, it was envisaged the EU might take note of public opinion as expressed in these polls.

This idea was one of the top three preferred ideas of all respondents.

### **D. The possibility, given several times per year, to meet with your members of the European parliament or other EU politicians in the vicinity of where you live.**

**Initially this idea had low-key appeal in theory.** However, **on further consideration**, it was pointed out that **the meetings would need to be held at convenient times and in readily accessible places.** In reality respondents suspected that unless particularly motivated they would not bother to attend.

Overall support for this idea was limited (only one respondent put it in their top three selections).

### **E. Consultations through the internet organised by the European commission whenever**

**major decisions have to be taken in the EU, open to all citizens.**

### **The idea of allowing everyone to contribute to EU consultations initially sounded good.**

*"Everybody could take part. It would touch base with a lot of people. Everybody is on-line through their phone or at home".*

**On second thoughts** however **the practicality of the idea was questioned** and it was characterised as a "fairy-tale". Although the idea of gathering opinion widely seemed good it was seen as a bit naive. In practice doubts were raised about how the many and varied inputs could be analysed in order to help and guide EU decision making. The content of twitter was alluded to as an example of what could be expected.

Finally it was suggested that the EU probably already invited participation in its consultations; but did anybody bother to contribute?

Overall support for this idea was low. No respondents put it in their top three selections.

### **F. Similar consultations, organised by our national government.**

**This was marginally preferred to consultations being organised by the EU** (proposition e). It made them seem more immediately relevant to people in the UK. It was hoped that the UK government would want to look after their citizens' interests.

It was emphasized that this kind of consultation would only work well if it is easy to log on and give views. People would not go out of their way to participate.

Overall support for this idea was low. No respondents put it in their top three selections.

### **G. An interactive service using the internet and social networks, to collect on a permanent basis citizens' views, wishes or criticisms on directions taken by the EU.**

**This idea fitted in with the group's thinking.** It seemed like an easy to access, straightforward way of getting opinions that would encourage more widespread participation.



Its appeal would be enhanced if participants could also get feedback on the range of views being expressed.

However support for this idea was limited. No respondent listed it in their top three ideas.

**H. Information campaigns to be developed much more actively than in past years, in order to encourage citizens to involve themselves in the debates that are to take place and to take part in the coming election of members of the European parliament next spring.**

It came as news to these respondents that the EU was holding elections for its parliament next spring. (All the respondents claimed that they did not vote in last European parliament elections.)

**The idea of giving more publicity to these elections made sense** to respondents some of whom saw it as an opportunity to register their dissent with the European project.

Three respondents included this idea in their top three idea section.

*"We are very negative about the EU because we don't know much about it. We only know what we are told. If we knew more maybe we would be more positive."*

## APPENDIX - DISCUSSION GUIDE

### Qualitative study on citizens' involvement in the European Union

**Introduction:** ask each participant to introduce him (her) self with a few words, by saying who he (she) is and what he (she) does, etc.

#### Theme 1

**We are here together today to talk about the European Union.**

**Could you please tell me what first comes to your mind about the EU?**

- Spontaneous reactions
- Probe:
  - Nature of topics spontaneously mentioned about the EU
  - Positive and negative aspects related to the EU
  - Degree of initial interest and involvement of the respondents in EU related issues

#### Theme 2

**Now, regarding what you know and what you think about the EU: where does that come from?**

**From what sources do you get information or do you hear opinions about the EU - taking the word "sources" in the widest sense, ranging from official information sources to informal conversations with friends or other people...?**

- Spontaneous reactions
- Probe:
  - Degree of diversity of the sources mentioned
  - Nature of (information) inputs from each one
  - Interest/credibility of each one

#### Theme 3

**Let us now discuss more specifically the future of the European Union and questions you may ask yourselves in that respect.**

**There are probably certain aspects which you regard as important and you would like to know and understand better as regards the way the EU works and the directions it takes - as you may not get all the information you would like to get from the sources you have mentioned earlier.**

**What aspects would you particularly wish to know more about?**

- spontaneous reactions
- probe:
  - general impressions of having a good or a poor degree of knowledge/understanding of these issues

- perception of major challenges for the EU in the coming years
- Expressions by respondents of a need for better knowledge and understanding - on what subjects more particularly? In what is the information currently available on these subjects not satisfactory?

#### Theme 4

**As a citizen, you should be able to give your opinion and to have your voice heard as regards future directions of the European Union - whether to approve or to disapprove such or such a direction, or for any other reason...**

**How can you do that today?**

- Spontaneous reactions
- Probe:
  - perceived ease/difficulty to express oneself and to have one's voice heard on EU related Issues - by what means?
  - Perceived reasons why it is difficult
  - Specific subjects on which respondents would particularly wish to give their opinion and
  - To be listened to as citizens; expectations in that respect.

#### Theme 5

**One may think of various means by which European citizens like us could have their voice heard.**

**Let me propose to try and think of any possible means, just letting our imagination run, without giving up an idea even if we do not know for the moment how it could be implemented in practice.**

**What could we imagine?**

- Spontaneous reactions
- stimulate the group's' creativity by encouraging respondents to "jump" from one idea to another

#### Theme 6

**I am now going to submit to you various ideas that have being put forward, of means that could be put in place to allow citizens to have their voice better heard on EU related issues.**

**I will ask you what you think of each one.**

- - make the respondents react to each proposition in turn, asking them about their degree of interest for each one and reasons thereof

**A.** An information service on the functioning of the EU and EU policies, comprising an information office open for the public in every large city, a web site, and a service quickly answering any questions asked by telephone, mail or email.

**B.** Debates to be organised in major media between average citizens and experts of EU issues on the directions taken by the EU.

**C.** Opinion polls on the EU organised regularly in the whole of Europe, allowing citizens to know both what their fellow countrymen and what the citizens of the other countries think.

**D.** The possibility, given several times per year, to meet with your members of the European parliament or other EU politicians in the vicinity of where you live.

**E.** Consultations through the internet organised by the European commission whenever major decisions have to be taken in the EU, open to all citizens.

**F.** Similar consultations, organised by our national government.

**G.** an interactive service using the internet and social networks, to collect on a permanent basis citizens' views, wishes or criticisms on directions taken by the EU.

**H.** Information campaigns to be developed much more actively than in past years, in order to encourage citizens to involve themselves in the debates that are to take place and to take part in the coming election of members of the European parliament next spring.

Thank you again for coming to participate in this discussion.

If other ideas cross your mind following the discussion, do not hesitate to let us know.

(Communicate a relevant email address which the respondents can use for that purpose)

WHAT DO CITIZENS THINK THE FUTURE CHALLENGES OF THE EU ARE?

Virginie Timmerman, *Synthesis*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, December 2014

HOW WOULD CITIZENS LIKE TO COMMUNICATE WITH THE EUROPEAN UNION?

Virginie Timmerman and Daniel Debomy, *Synthesis*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, December 2014

HOW DOES THE EUROPEAN UNION COMMUNICATE WITH CITIZENS?

Virginie Timmerman and Daniel Debomy, *Synthesis*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, November 2014

HOW DO CITIZENS SEE THE EUROPEAN UNION?

Virginie Timmerman, *Synthesis*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, November 2014

▶ HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH THE EU? THE OPINION OF EUROPEAN CITIZENS

Video, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, November 2014

CITIZENS FACING "BRUSSELS' EUROPE"

Virginie Timmerman, *Synthesis*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, August 2014

EUROPEAN CITIZENS IN BRUSSELS: WHAT MESSAGES?

Virginie Timmerman, *Synthesis*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, August 2014

THE INVOLVEMENT OF EU CITIZENS IN THE EUROPEAN PROJECT

Daniel Debomy, *Synthesis*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, July 2014

▶ WHAT THE FRENCH TOLD US ABOUT GLOBALISATION

Video, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, May 2014

▶ WHAT THE FRENCH TOLD US ABOUT EURO

Video, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, May 2014

▶ WHAT THE FRENCH TOLD US ABOUT THE EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY

Video, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, May 2014

▶ WHAT THE FRENCH TOLD US ABOUT THE EMPLOYEMENT IN THE EU

Video, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, May 2014

EU NO, EURO YES? EUROPEAN PUBLIC OPINIONS FACING THE CRISIS (2007-2012)

Daniel Debomy, *Policy Paper No. 90*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, March 2013

DO THE EUROPEANS STILL BELIEVE IN THE EU?

Daniel Debomy, *Studies & Reports No. 91*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, June 2012

MIGRANTS – EUROPEAN STORIES

Frédéric Praud, Florence Brêthes, Hamed Borsali and Kiel, *Comics*, Paroles d'hommes et de femmes / Notre Europe, May 2012

THE CITIZENS OF EUROPE AND THE EUROPEAN UNION IN THE CURRENT CRISIS

Daniel Debomy, *Policy Paper No. 47*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute / Fondation Jean Jaurès, November 2011

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