

News story: Robin Walker Speech at Community Outreach event

As a Minister at the Department for Exiting the EU, I have spoken at a number of these events with our EU communities here in the UK and I am delighted to be here tonight to hear from you directly.

The purpose of our meeting today is to bring you, the French community here in the UK, together with officials from the Department for Exiting the EU and the Home Office to reassure you on your rights and discuss the issues that matter most to you.

I know that many of you, your friends and your families, will want to know what our EU exit means for your future in the UK. As we have made clear throughout this process, and as the PM emphasised in her speech in Florence: EU citizens who have made their lives in the UK are highly valued, we want you to stay; and we thank you for your contribution to our country.

The United Kingdom and France are very close partners and friends – as has been shown in recent weeks – and I hope that tonight's event can help to demonstrate our desire – as we prepare to leave the EU – to maintain the strong bonds that we have created over generations, indeed centuries.

Everyone in this room, and members of the French community across the whole of the UK, make a contribution to British society and culture. You help save lives, you teach children, you enrich our business, tech and finance industries, and you help to make Britain the inclusive and diverse society it is. So I want to stress that you are an important part of our community. We want to make sure that everyone here continues to feel welcome – and that you're able to carry on living your lives as before, in the country you have chosen to make your home.

I hope that today's event will demonstrate that commitment.

From the start of our negotiations we have prioritised citizens' rights. I am delighted that in March we were able to announce real progress on the legal drafting of the Withdrawal Agreement. This includes successfully translating all the commitments made in the December political agreement between us and the EU commission on citizens' rights into the Withdrawal Agreement legal text. This agreement will enshrine your rights in international law, securing your rights, and those of the other 3 million EU citizens in the UK, and 1 million UK nationals in the EU.

This agreement gives certainty not only about residency, but also healthcare, pensions and other benefits. We understand that the arrangements on which citizens rely need to go beyond broad political declarations and deal with the realities of people and their lives. The point of meetings such as today is to hear from you and learn about these realities.

It will enable families who have built their lives together in the UK and EU to stay together. And will ensure close family members can join after the implementation period, on the basis of current EU rules, as long as the relationship existed at the end of the implementation period – 31 December 2020.

Let me stress – the guarantee we are giving on your rights is real. We have committed to incorporating the Withdrawal Agreement fully into UK law. This will mean that the UK courts can refer directly to it and your rights are protected fully in law both here and internationally.

Details of the agreement are set out in a Joint Report published on 8 December and the Withdrawal Agreement legal text, published on 19 March.

Our agreement with the EU will protect your right to residency through granting settled status.

You will hear fuller details of this proposed scheme later in the evening but let me summarise:

Settled status will be granted to those who have been in the UK for five years or more at the end of the implementation period. For those of you – or your friends – who don't yet have five years residency on that day, the 31st December 2020, we will make sure that you will be able to stay to make up these years, so you can apply for settled status when you have.

We have committed to giving you until June 2021 to submit an application for settled status – and we have made a commitment in the Withdrawal Agreement that this application system will be smooth, streamlined and low cost. I know that the French community in the UK is long established, and for those who have already acquired permanent residence documents I would like to stress that there will be a simple process to exchange this for a settled status document completely free of charge. This will also be available to people who have documents demonstrating Indefinite Leave to Remain, such as those who came before the UK joined the EU.

In addition, those who acquire settled status will be able to leave the country for up to 5 years, without losing their right to return. In this respect we have gone further than existing EU law which only allows for an absence of 2 years in the permanent residence process.

The Home Office is currently developing this application system, which will be designed with your needs and priorities in mind. This system will be launched for voluntary applications by the end of this year, giving those of you already living in the UK, 2 and a half years to apply.

Events such as this give the officials working on the system the opportunity to hear directly from EU citizens to ensure it is carefully designed to meet your needs. I am grateful to the officials from my department and the Home Office who are here to listen to you and to take your questions.

Even while we're leaving the EU, we want to continue to deepen the strong relationship we already have with France, after decades, indeed centuries, of

cooperation.

The UK's relationship with France is one of the longest, most complex and, arguably, most important in the world. In 48 years' time, it will be one thousand years – a millennium – since William the Conqueror landed near Hastings, and the Duke of Normandy became the King of England. The famous Bayeux Tapestry chronicles William's triumph and we are delighted that, at the 35th Franco-British Summit hosted at Sandhurst earlier this year, President Macron agreed the loan of the Bayeux Tapestry to the UK –an important signal of the depth of our relationship and a marker for how far we have come since William landed on UK shores.

Of course, the UK and France have a partnership like no other. We work closely together across a full spectrum of issues from defence, to science, to culture and we reinforced this co-operation at this year's Franco British Summit. We agreed to: strengthen our security co-operation, including on military engagements, counter terrorism and cyber security; collaborate further to deliver cutting edge technologies in areas such as medicine and space; develop our partnership on education, and work together to protect our cultural heritage. And there's more.

We also have a strong economic relationship – France's total trade with the UK is worth nearly 100 billion euros. And over 5,000 of our companies invest in each other's countries. As immediate neighbours it is in the interests of both the UK and France to forge a strong economic partnership between the UK and the EU on goods and services.

But of course, the relations between our two countries are not only, or primarily, about the relations between the Governments. It's the human stories and links that underpin our shared history and future. These are ties of family, friendship, work and beyond. There are hundreds of thousands of British and French citizens living in each other's countries. And there are no fewer than 12 million British visits to France each year – more than any other country in the world. Likewise, more French people visit the UK than those of any other nationality. It is no coincidence that the French language is the first language, after English, that is taught in schools here.

French schools have been operating across the UK for years – there are over a dozen such schools in London alone. And at our recent summit the UK and France agreed to deepen cooperation across all education sectors, to increase opportunities for young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. We also have very close ties in the higher education sector, which were set out to me when I visited the University of London Institute in Paris recently. It is clear to see that the lives of hundreds of thousands of French and British people are intertwined every day, and it is these people who will make the Franco-British relationship such a rich one for years to come.

All of you here today are a big part of that and, as the Prime Minister said at the Franco British Summit reception at the V&A Museum: "I am proud that more than three million EU citizens [including hundreds of thousands of our French friends] have chosen to make your homes and livelihoods here in our

country. We greatly value the depth of the contributions you make – enriching every part of our economy, our society, our culture and our national life. We know our country would be poorer if you left and I want you to stay”.

I echo these remarks and I know that President Macron feels the same about the British Community in France.

So I hope that you leave today more informed by the steps we’re taking to secure your future. I also hope that you leave today able to share the information you learn with your friends and relatives in the French community and have the chance to share your views with us.

Reassuring and informing our citizens is best done when it is a shared endeavour. That’s why we hope to host more events such as this with EU citizens across the country.

We value enormously the French community in the UK, and I hope today’s event will help to ensure we provide reassurance to as many people as possible that, despite the challenges of Brexit, there is a bright future for French people in Britain.

Both our Foreign Secretary and the President of France have spoken about London as the sixth biggest French city in the world. We want our French neighbours to continue to enjoy the UK, to contribute to our communities and to continue to be part of the fabric of our nation. The UK and France will remain partners, neighbours and friendly rivals for generations to come.