



## **School group travel 2023 survey of operators Key findings**

### **Survey**

- The Tourism Alliance and our partner members undertook a survey of businesses involved in organising school group travel from the EU to the UK.
- 145 business took part who collectively brought 728,000 school children to the UK in 2019.
- Fieldwork took place between 2 May and 1 June 2023.

### **Background – the passport issue**

Since the UK left the EU every school child, including those on organised trips, require a passport at the UK border. ID cards, which are commonly issued in the EU, and which are acceptable for travel to many other countries, are not accepted by the UK authorities.

Prior to the UK leaving the EU, bringing a school group to the UK from other EU countries was a relatively simple process due to the “List of Travellers” scheme. Under this scheme, students who were EU nationals, or had the right to reside in the EU, could travel to the UK as part of an organised school group, provided that they were accompanied by a teacher from the school who provided Border Force with a completed form with details of each child.

A large percentage of EU school students do not have passports. Figures vary by country but, for example, it is estimated that only 35% of Italian school children have a passport.

Many schools have children who are foreign nationals with the right to live in the EU but who do not have the right to an EU passport. In addition to the passport requirement, many of these children would require a visa to enter the UK. Under these circumstances, it is extremely unlikely that a school group trip to the UK would proceed when other options are so much more easily accessible.

We undertook surveys early and late in 2022 to understand the impact of this policy and other barriers to school group travel which demonstrated the centrality of the passport issue as a key barrier.

In 2023, we wanted to refresh this insight to see if this was still a significant barrier and to assess the continuing impact on school group travel.

## Key findings

- Between **2019 and 2022** the number of school children the business surveyed brought to the UK from the EU declined by **81%**.
- Over the same period the figure for school children going to the EU declined by only **53%**, likely as a result of issues around Covid.
- Recovery from these figures is **starkly different** between the EU and UK.
- The surveyed businesses expect to recover their school group trips to the EU to **108%** of 2019 figures in 2023.
- In contrast, the businesses expect to recover their UK school trips to only **61%** of 2019 figures this year.

## Barriers

In order to understand the impact of the changes to passport requirements we asked businesses how important that particular factor was along with a range of other potential barriers to bringing school groups to the UK.

Where 1 = “not at all important” and 5 = “extremely important” the following shows the percentage of business who ranked each factor as 5

Possible barrier	%age saying barrier is 'extremely important'
Increased cost of travel to the UK	56%
Concerned regarding Covid	4%
Concerns regarding safety	20%
Concerns regarding congestion/delays at the border	29%
The requirement for all students to have a passport to enter the UK	74%

The increased cost of travel to the UK, likely a function of widespread cost-of-living and inflation pressures, is clearly an important factor, however the passport issue is far and away the most significant barrier according to the surveyed business.

Below is a selection of the additional comments from some respondents<sup>1</sup>:

- We lost a group of +150 kids this year who were supposed to go the UK in May because of the new passport requirement - they decided to travel to Europe instead. The group that accepted to come (145 kids) was very stressed about the new rules and feared complications before and on the day of travel.*
- The biggest barrier is actually the visa regulation for non-EU students. Therefore, we definitely need a solution e.g. "list of travellers". Now it means, the schools are forced to book another destination or to leave students behind, just because they were born outside the EU.*
- Why should parents go through this nightmare of visa and passport if there are lots of other nice destinations available?*
- The visa issue is a really big problem. Children living in Austria with non-EU citizenship have real troubles getting a visa and also it is really expensive to them.*
- We have lost students over the last couple of years as they have decided to study English courses in Ireland, Malta or summer schools in their own countries rather than coming to the UK and having to obtain passports or deal with visa delays.*
- The problem is there are many non-EU children who live and study in the Czech Republic and they need visa to enter UK for a short visit. In the past the form "list of passengers on a school trip within EU" was needed, which was ok. The visa process is very slow, costly and does not guarantee issuing the visa.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Edited for clarity and format only.

- *Passport issuing adds an extra cost of approximately 100 euro on top of an already expensive educational trip. This can put off potential participants.*
- *Some students are not Italian citizens and they [would need] a visa even for one week, which is too expensive and complicated to get...A group visa or document to enter the UK could solve the problem*
- *Students resident in Italy with no European citizenship needs visas for travelling as part of a group. It means it is very expensive and takes a long time to get it.*
- *Major barriers are roaming fees, rise of cost of food and drink, non-EU students to obtain visa - very lengthy process. When I have a few non-EU students the schools typically choose Ireland as a destination as they don't want the families to go through the process of obtaining a visa.*
- *Going back to a system where youths travelling to the UK for short educational stays (linguistic stays and school stays) is a major issue in order to going back to figures anywhere near to the ones before the obligation of having a passport.*

## **Next steps**

The Government recently recognised the existence of a problem and undertook to ameliorate it in the UK-France leaders joint declaration<sup>2</sup>:

*“On school travel, the United Kingdom committed to ease the travel of school groups to the UK by making changes to documentary requirements for schoolchildren on organised trips from France. France commits to ensuring appropriate mechanisms are in place for visa free travel for children travelling on organised school trips from the United Kingdom and to facilitating the passage of those groups through the border.”*

We have warmly welcomed this undertaking and have urged the Government to ensure that any policy must recognise the low risk of absconding and over-staying among school children on organised school trips and that any solution which eases the problem for UK-France travel must be scalable to other countries. 23% of the respondents to our survey, for instance, were companies based in Italy. A long-term solution simply for France-UK trips would make no logical sense, but is a good place to start.

It is important to remember that group travel such as that which we've discussed here gets planned and booked in advance – often a year or more. The longer we wait before a resolution to this is agreed, the longer it will take to recover the market.

The UK has a massive amount to offer all tourists, including school groups. They want to come here to experience our cities, our culture, attractions and heritage, visit the coast and the countryside, experience our hospitality and to learn English in our world-class facilities. But the barriers we have put up are too high for these assets to overcome. We need action.

**June 2023**

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-france-joint-leaders-declaration/uk-france-joint-leaders-declaration>