WORKING & LIVING IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

PRE-COURSE READING

Babel
Language And Cultural Training

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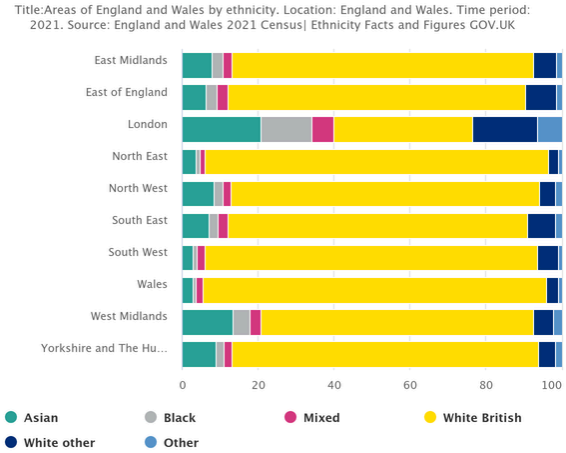
PART I: COUNTRY PROFILE UNITED KINGDOM

The United Kingdom is an island nation located in north-western Europe, separated from the mainland by the English Channel. The UK consists of Great Britain (England, Scotland, Wales) and Northern Ireland. The largest cities are London, Birmingham, Manchester, Glasgow and Liverpool, with Cardiff and Belfast the largest cities in Wales and Northern Ireland respectively. English is the official language, but Welsh and Scottish Gaelic are also spoken in certain regions.

The UK is known for its multicultural society, with a diverse population composed of people with ethnically British or Irish backgrounds as well as people from many other countries, including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Poland, Romania and other EU citizens, and China, among others.



Population: 69.7 million

Capital: London
Devolved Capitals:
Edinburgh, Cardiff, Belfast

Ethnic Groups:
White British/European 86%
Asian 7%
Black British 3%
Mixed 2%
Other 2%

Languages:
Official: English
Recognised Regional Languages: Scots, Scottish Gaelic, Welsh, Irish, Cornish

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Religion:
No religion 53%
Christian 40%
Muslim 4.4%
Hindu 1.4%
Sikh 0.4%
Jewish 0.4%
Other 0.9%

British Economy

The economy of the UK is the sixth largest in the world, and the third largest in Europe. The service sector is the largest sector of the UK economy, followed by manufacturing and construction. The UK is home to many world-class universities and has a strong tradition of innovation and scientific research. The country is a major player in global finance, with London being one of the world's largest financial centres.

Inequalities in the UK

Economic Inequalities

The UK has high inequality of income compared to other developed countries; scoring 9th on the most unequal incomes of 38 OECD countries (OECD, 2022). The UK's wealth inequality is much more severe than income inequality, with the top fifth taking 36% of the country's income and 63% of the country's wealth while the bottom fifth have only 8% of the income and only 0.5% of the wealth according to the Office for National Statistics.

Education Inequalities

In 2023/24 25.8% of disadvantaged pupils got a grade 5 (a good pass) in English and Maths compared to 53.1% of their non disadvantaged peers. This gap has widened very slightly from 2022/23 (0.1%).

Diversity in the Workplace

Gender diversity

While there is a gender pay gap in the UK, the UK government has taken steps to address this issue, and companies are expected to promote gender equality and diversity in the workplace. Women hold executive and leadership roles in businesses and government across the country. Gender equality is an important topic in the UK and women are expected to be treated equally within education and the workplace, although there are areas of inequality. Men are almost twice as likely to be a manager, director or senior official than women. The UK ranked 4th in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report's Rankings for 2025.

Religious and Ethnic Diversity

Workplaces and social areas are expected to accommodate different expressions of diversity and religion including accepting different dietary preferences, prayer rooms and dress choice. There is also an emphasis in the UK on adopting inclusive and non-offensive language (politically correct) so as not to offend people. However, there is a growing divide between people who think people are too easily offended and those who think we should use more sensitive language and avoid difficult topics. This is now known as a 'culture war'.

Additional link:
Britons most against political correctness globally, while country still seen as less divided than US | Ipsos

Class System and Social Mobility

The class system in the UK is largely defined by income, house ownership, education and social life/hobbies. The main classes in the UK have traditionally been working class, middle class and upper class, although the BBC devised a Great British Class calculator based on income, home ownership, social and cultural preferences to define 7 different classes.

Many people believe there is a large gap between social classes in the UK, and that it is difficult to move between classes. Social mobility in the UK is still low - a parents' wealth still strongly influences the child's prospects of higher education and a good salary. Children born in the Midlands or the North have lower levels of social mobility and there are also differences within gender and ethnicity.

Government and Politics

The UK has a Parliament and a Government alongside a Monarch. HM Government consists of the Prime Minister, their Cabinet and junior ministers, supported by the teams of non-political civil servants that work in government departments.

The Government are the people responsible for running the country. The political party that wins the most seats at a General Election takes charge of the Government for up to five years, until the next General Election.

Parliament is there to represent peoples interests and make sure these are taken into account by the Government. The Government cannot make new laws or raise new taxes without Parliament's agreement.

Parliament is made up of both elected and appointed people, who sit in two separate Houses:

- The House of Commons, where all the people elected at the General Election work, as MPs, for the next five years. This includes people in other political parties.
- The House of Lords, whose members are mostly appointed for life rather than elected. They have often been chosen because of their achievements and experience. Many do not belong to a political party.

The UK has had devolved governments since the late 1990s, which work alongside the Westminster Parliament. This means that certain powers have been transferred from the central Government in London to nations and regions within the UK.

Royal Family

The Head of State is the Monarch (King Charles III). There is a strong constitutional convention that states the Monarch should be kept out of politics although there are several ceremonial roles that the Monarch has including:

- appointing the Prime Minister and other ministers
- opening new sessions of parliament
- giving royal assent to bills passed by parliament
- granting honours and titles

While there was a decrease in popularity for the Monarchy following the passing of HM Queen Elizabeth II, latest polls show public support for the monarchy is rising again, with 58% now in favour of retaining the monarchy, and the young Royals in particular the most popular with Britons.

Politics in the UK

The political landscape in the UK has undergone some very big changes in the past 10 years including the Brexit vote and the change of political party in the General Election of 2024.

The main political parties in the UK are Labour (currently in power), the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats. The devolved Governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland allow other political parties in to power, focused on local issues. Currently the biggest local political parties are the Scottish National Party (SNP) in Scotland, Plaid Cymru in Wales, and Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland. Devolved Governments tackle issues on education, environment, housing, healthcare etc. in their respective nations. However, the UK Government in Westminster, London, retains power over foreign policy, defence and security, immigration and taxation rates (although the Scottish Government has powers to raise or lower income tax).

Political party support in Britain used to be primarily driven by a left-right ideology, but Brexit intensified a new ideological split: the libertarian or authoritarian divide.

The Brexit vote was based on many complex issues including sovereignty, immigration, the economy and anti-establishment politics, but here is a good study that explains why it happened and here is a link to explain the resulting impacts on the political landscape in the UK.

There are still strong opinions and divides on this issue within British society with some people concerned about the negative impact it has had on the British economy, some regretting their decision within the vote whereas others are wanting to move on from it.

Additional link:
Brexit and what has changed in the South in the last eight years - BBC News

PART II: CULTURE, VALUES AND BELIEFS

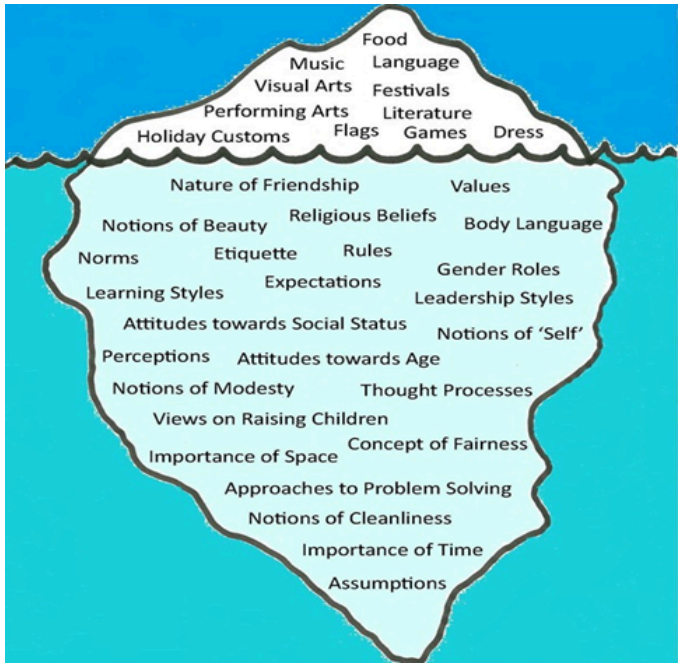
Definitions of Culture

"We are no more aware of our own culture than the fish is, of the water it swims in."
"Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group from another."
Geert Hofstede, Social Psychologist

"Culture is the biggest 'we' that we feel we belong to."
Prof Lamin Sanne, Yale Divinity School

The Cultural Iceberg

The Iceberg Model shows how much of culture is visible and how much is invisible. The invisible part looks at values and beliefs. These are the aspects where we can understand more about 'culture'.



Common British Values

- **Understatement:** The British tend to be understated and represent things as being less important than they actually are. Some people think this is a tactic to avoid embarrassment and take attention away from themselves. For example: 'It is quite good' means that it is good.

- **Tradition:** It is impossible to outline all the British traditions as there are so many and it depends on ethnicity and regions. However, some include tea drinking, queuing, going to the pub and saying 'sorry' lots of times.

- **Fair play:** The concept of fair play is valued in British culture, where people generally believe in treating others with respect and equality. The idea of fair competition is especially important in business and sports, where cheating and unfair advantages are frowned upon and can damage one's reputation. Symbolically, queueing represents fair play in everyday life. Never jump the queue!

- **Privacy and Politeness:** Privacy and personal space are respected in British culture. People tend to be polite and reserved in public settings, often avoiding confrontation or direct criticism, although you may see confrontation.

- **Work-Life Balance:** While hard work is respected in British culture, there is also a strong emphasis on maintaining a healthy work-life balance. People often take their time off seriously and prioritise their personal lives and hobbies outside of work.

- **Humour:** Humour is an important part of British culture, with people often using sarcasm, irony, and self-deprecation in their communication. A good sense of humour is often appreciated and can help to build relationships and ease tension in difficult situations. However, it is used in many different circumstances whether that is to break the ice, signal discomfort, change the subject or just create a relaxing environment. There is a type of humour called 'banter' when people who are very close friends are teasing each other, but to outsiders, it may seem like they are insulting each other! Sometimes, the British use humour within a work environment and this is acceptable.

- **Tolerance:** The British are generally accepting of different lifestyles, beliefs, and cultures. Tolerance and diversity are valued, and discrimination based on race, gender, sexuality, or religion and other protected characteristics is illegal.

Additional links:

- www.britishcouncil.pt/en/blog/british-traditions-and-culture
- www.bbc.com/culture/article/20230203-the-unruly-ancient-rituals-still-practised-today
- www.heritagecalling.com/2021/04/28/10-eccentric-english-customs-traditions-and-ceremonies-and-the-stories-behind-them/
- The most popular comedians in the UK | Entertainment | YouGov Ratings

Business Organisation in the UK

- Anglo/American corporate governance model (shareholder return/short-term profit) is prominent. The role of a company is to make money
- Executive compensation includes stock options and bonuses
- Diversity and inclusion is important in work-place
- From middle management upwards, people expect individual efforts to be rewarded and to move up an organisation quickly/see a clear path of development
- Work-life balance becoming more valued (many employees now working from home in white collar jobs)
- Although many companies in the UK appear to be hierarchical, there is a sense that all employees are valued and their work is essential for the good of the company
- British companies tend to be more pragmatic than conventional and are open to change so long as it is backed by facts, logic, and all pros and cons have been weighed up

Additional link:
https://www.expatica.com/uk/working/employment-basics/uk-business-culture-103182/

PART III: WHAT'S GOING ON IN THE UK RIGHT NOW?

Current Public Affairs:

The cost of living is a major concern for people across the UK. Inflation rose to 3.5% in the year to September 2026, with higher fuel and travel costs contributing to rising prices. The government is under pressure to support households while managing public spending and national debt, with its next Budget expected to set out further economic measures.

Immigration and asylum remain prominent and often divisive political issues. The government is progressing legislation to reform the asylum system and speed up immigration appeals. Meanwhile, the growing use of artificial intelligence (AI) has prompted further debate about its impact on jobs, public services and national security. The NHS, housing affordability and public service funding also remain important topics in political debate and everyday life.

Additional links:
- UK inflation and the cost of living, October 2026 | BBC News
- Immigration and Asylum Bill 2026 | GOV.UK
- UK government measures to address AI risks, October 2026 | GOV.UK

Social Trends:

The way people in the UK live and work has changed considerably in recent years. Hybrid working has become more common, allowing many employees to divide their time between home and the office. This has influenced commuting habits, working routines and how people balance their professional and personal lives. However, the opportunities for flexible working vary depending on the job and industry.

Leisure activities and community connections remain an important part of British life. Sports clubs, hobby groups, local events and volunteering offer opportunities to meet people and build friendships. Recent government research found that 35% of adults in England took part in formal or informal volunteering at least once a month in 2025–26, highlighting the continued role of community involvement in everyday life.

Additional link:
- Who has access to hybrid working in Great Britain? | ONS
- Community and Engagement Survey 2025/26: Summary report — GOV.UK

Public issues:

The cost of living remains one of the biggest concerns in the UK, alongside the state of the economy and the NHS. Many households continue to feel pressure from everyday expenses, particularly food, fuel and energy bills. Employment has also become a growing concern, while younger adults are especially affected by the high cost of housing and difficulties getting onto the property ladder.

According to the latest ONS figures, 79% of adults identified the NHS as an important issue facing the country, while 61% highlighted immigration and 58% crime. Climate change and the environment have also become increasingly prominent concerns, with public attention focusing on extreme weather, energy use and environmental protection. These issues continue to influence public debate and the priorities of the UK government.

Additional link:

- Public opinions and social trends, Great Britain - Office for National Statistics

Local issues in Somerset

The county of Somerset in Western England is one of the most fertile parts of the UK, with over 60% of Somerset being farmland. However, a major issue facing Somerset is changing environmental factors, in particular heavy rainfall causing severe flooding, while recent record-breaking summer heatwaves in the UK has caused damage to infrastructure unsuited to the heat. This is a major concern for the local economy and residents alike, as agriculture is a major part of the local economy, with many farms being family run for several generation.

Another major issue facing Somerset is the need to update outdated infrastructure as a result of both environmental factors and wider technological trends. This has become a bigger issue with the local public due to the increased scrutiny over public spending in local councils in the UK.

Additional links:

- Somerset Council prepares to set budget for 2025/26
- Essential Somerset reservoirs upgraded to prevent flooding
- SomersestSWT_State_Of_Naturep55Agriculture.pdf

Local culture:

Politically, much of Somerset currently sits on the left of the political spectrum, with the centre-left Liberal Democrats the dominant party in Somerset Council. This is at odds with wider national trends that are shifting towards the right. A largely rural region with a strong farming community, much of the population comes from families that have lived in the area for many generations. Population density is low, and it is noticeably far less diverse than elsewhere in the UK, with a considerable proportion of residents aged 65 or over (Somerset is a popular destination for urban Britons to settle down in during retirement due to its natural beauty and slower paced lifestyle). The aging population poses a major concern for local planning and services in the coming years.

Additional links:

- UK Parliamentary Constituencies Map - best detailed constituencies & MP data - by Maproom
- Somerset (Unitary Authority, South West England, United Kingdom) - Population Statistics, Charts, Map and Location

PART IV: LIVING IN THE UK PRACTICAL ASPECTS

Eating Out, Food and Drink

Despite having a historically bad reputation for good food, the UK has many tasty dishes and regional specialities. The main cities have a huge variety of restaurants featuring food from across the globe and many towns have take-aways of Chinese, Indian, Japanese and Turkish food. Tipping is common in the UK (anything from 10% upwards) although some restaurants add on an automatic service charge for larger groups.

There are many food delivery apps you can use in the cities and towns including UberEATS, Deliveroo and Just Eat.

There are many international and French restaurants found all over the UK, not just in London, as well as various online French supermarket delivery services such as FrenchClick, Mon Panier Latin and Bonne Bouffe who provide UK wide delivery. Many British supermarkets also now stock French food items, particularly in the larger stores, due to the growth in popularity for French cuisine in the country.

Additional link:

- French Stores and their UK Equivalents

British Food and Drink Habits

According to Government data, 5% of British people are vegetarians (no meat products) and 2% are vegan (no animal products at all) and many restaurants cater to many different dietary preferences including GF (gluten free) and DF (dairy free).

Tea is the second most frequently drunk beverage in the UK (1st is tap water) although it is more popular amongst the older generation - 1 in 4 of 16-24 years do not drink tea. You may hear the word ‘cuppa’ which means a cup of tea. Coffee has become more popular in recent years and there are many coffee shops within the UK and drive-ins for Starbucks and Costa on many main roads.

Overview of Bank Holidays

Most businesses close on bank holidays although some supermarkets and retailers stay open on bank holidays in larger cities and towns. Most shops close on Christmas Day. In smaller towns, shops may also close on Sundays and sometimes Mondays too.

Getting Around

The UK Transport system is better in the cities than it is in rural areas. Some cities like Sheffield and Edinburgh have trams and London is the only city in the UK with an extensive underground train network (known as the Tube). This website gives you information on using the Tube.

If you want to use taxis, most train stations have taxis outside of them or you can use Uber. In London, you can call taxis (black cabs) by holding your hand up on the street if you see a yellow 'vacant' sign on top of them. You can usually pay by card as most cabs have card machines in them.

Overground trains are not as reliable as in France as delays and cancellations are common and can be very expensive, depending on how far in advance you book tickets. Many British people joke about the train system but it is becoming a source of frustration especially with rising prices. This website gives you information on the national rail network and you can book tickets directly via the train service providers websites.

Cars drive on the left-hand side of the road in the UK opposite to right-hand drive in France. You can drive any small vehicle (e.g. car or motorcycle) listed on your full and valid licence for 12 months from when you last entered Great Britain (GB). After 12 months you'll need to take a theory test and practical test to get a Great Britain issued driving licence. For further information, contact the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA).

The UK road network can get very busy and there are also many potholes. It is best to check your journey via Maps before setting out to travel. There are many roundabouts on the roads in the UK so make sure you understand how to navigate these properly.

Additional link:
https://www.visitbritain.com/en/plan-your-trip/travelling-around-britain

Weather and Climate

The UK benefits from the Gulf Stream - a powerful, warm and swift Atlantic Ocean current that originates in the Gulf of Mexico, which makes the UK significantly warmer than places on a similar latitude and leads to more rain on the Western coastal regions.

In winter, it rarely drops below freezing during the day although it does for short periods of time overnight and in Scotland where temperatures fall below zero in winter in the day and there can often be heavy snowfalls. The UK can experience heatwaves in the summer months, but the average temp is around 23°C in July. December and January bring storms to the British Isles and the UK has experienced significant flooding recently. The weather in the UK can have a large impact on transport (road closures and train or flight cancellations). You can get reliable updates and local weather forecasts from The Met Office.

There is a big difference in daylight hours throughout the year in the UK. It's not uncommon to be out in the last of the summer daylight at 22:00 in late June. The reverse challenge exists in December when sunrise is about 08:00 and light fades by 16:00. Each year, on the last Sunday in March, the clocks go forward by one hour (at 01:00/1am), and they go back again on the last Sunday in October (at 02:00/2am). The legal time in the UK in the winter is called Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and the period when the clocks are 1 hour ahead (meaning there is more daylight in the evenings) is called British Summer Time (BST).

Measurements

The UK is supposed to use the metric system for measurement (especially when selling goods) but there are some cases where people still use imperial measurements.

- Distances on roads are calculated in yards (yd) and miles (mi). All road speed signs are in miles.
- Height is normally stated in feet (ft) and inches (in).
- People are weighed in stones (st) and pounds (lbs.).
- Beer and milk are normally sold in pints/half pints although legally, they must display the metric measurement (litres/ml).

Media and Press

The UK has a strong tradition of public service broadcasting. See this link for more details on the main TV channels and newspapers.

If you want to watch terrestrial TV channels, including the BBC, you must purchase a TV License. Most British people now use streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney Plus and Apple TV+ to watch TV and you can buy streaming devices to plug into your TV, depending on which services you want to access.

Leisure and Hobbies

British people have varied hobbies and leisure activities including:
• Shopping
• Watching TV or going to the cinema
• Social media (Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook)
• Listening to music
• Reading
• Visiting friends and relations
• Going to the pub
• Eating out, baking, cooking or entertaining at home
• Exercising or playing in local sports clubs or doing sports on own (football, martial arts, netball, hockey, rock-climbing, golf, horse-riding and fishing)
• Gardening
• Playing music in bands or orchestras, singing in choirs or acting in amateur dramatic societies
• Rambling or hiking in the countryside
• Drawing, crafts, knitting, embroidery, cross stich, woodwork and DIY.

Sports - Football

Many local towns and all cities have their local football teams. There can sometimes be a big rivalry between teams in the same city or area and many football fans go to watch their team play on the weekend. French players currently make up the third largest nationality in the Men's Premier League, England's top tier of professional football.

Women's football has recently become very popular in the UK after the success of the England Women's Football Team, the Lionesses, winning back-to-back UEFA European Championships in 2022 and 2025, and coming second in the FIFA Women's World Cup in 2023.

Other Sports

Cricket is England's national sport and there are other sports that have developed extensively in the UK including rugby, golf and tennis. Most school children have access to play the following sports in secondary school (depending on facilities and season): Rugby, athletics, basketball, netball, gymnastics, cycling, hockey, swimming, football, badminton, tennis, cricket, rounders and rowing (mostly at public schools).

Many children and adults pursue the following sports at clubs outside of school:

- Ballet and other dance forms
- Martial Arts
- Golf
- Horse-riding
- Boxing
- Motorsports

Click here for more information about sports and leisure facilities in Somerset.

Most towns have municipal leisure centres you can join to go swimming or play other sports. There will also be other classes there including yoga, pilates and fitness classes. There are also many private gyms within cities and towns with facilities, but these are more expensive to join than municipal leisure centres. Some of these have spas included.

Places to Visit and Things to Do

There are many museums, theatres and exhibitions in the larger cities in the UK. The West End of London is famous for its musicals.

Helpful websites for places to visit:

- *www.somerset.gov.uk/community-leisure-and-tourism/*
- *www.nationaltrust.org.uk*
- *www.english-heritage.org.uk*
- *www.visitbritain.com/en*

French-related Societies in the UK

The Union of French Nationals Abroad has many networking events and opportunities to meet with other French expats living in the UK.

The Embassy of France in the UK has published a list of places of French Presence in the UK, with information ranging from legal aid to networking groups.

There are also other informal networks for French expats here:

- Alliance Française - for expats and families
- The Franco-British Council - for business and culture
- The Federation of French Associates in Great Britain - 38 member associations ranging from childcare and sport, to veteran support and business

Safety and Security

The UK is a fairly safe place, but it is worth taking sensible precautions by not leaving doors unlocked or your bag open or money visible on public transport as there are pickpockets and robberies. Never leave your bag, goods or mobile phone unattended, and report any unattended bags or items in public places. Some parts of large cities can have higher levels of crime, so it is worth being attentive of your surroundings.

Call **999** in an **emergency** to contact the police, ambulance or fire department (or coast guard, mountain rescue, cave rescue).

For any **non-urgent** crimes contact the police by calling **101** and for non-medical emergency enquiries, you can call **111**.

For more advice, visit: https://www.police.uk/cp/crime-prevention/

Education System

There are various types of schools in the UK including state and private schools. There are five stages of education: early years, primary, secondary, Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE).

Education is compulsory for all children between the ages of 5 (4 in Northern Ireland) and 16. FE is not compulsory and covers non-advanced education which can be taken at further (including tertiary) education colleges and HE institutions (HEIs). The fifth stage, HE, is study beyond GCE A levels and their equivalent which, for most full-time students, takes place in universities and other HEIs and colleges.

Early Years Education

In England since September 2010, all three- and four-year-olds are entitled to 15 hours of free nursery education for 38 weeks of the year. Early Years education takes place in a variety of settings including state nursery schools, nursery classes and reception classes within primary schools, as well as settings outside the state sector such as voluntary pre-schools, privately run nurseries or childminders. Children start the school year in September in England and mid-August in Scotland. The ages below are for the ages the children will be at the end of each key stage.

Primary

The primary stage covers three age ranges:

- Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS): Under 5
- Key Stage 1: Year 1 (Age 5-6) and Year 2 (Age 6-7)
- Key Stage 2: Year 3 (Age 7-8), Year 4 (Age 8-9), Year 5 (Age 9-10) and Year 6 (Age 10-11)

Assessments in Primary Schools:

- Phonics screening teachers use the system of Phonics to teach children to read in British schools. They are taught to recognise the sounds that each individual letter makes, identify the sounds that different combinations of letters make - such as 'sh' or 'oo'; and blend these sounds together from left to right to make a word. Children can then use this knowledge to 'decode' new words that they hear or see. See this link for more information.
- Non-statutory Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) at the end of Key Stage 1. Some schools do not administer these, as they feel this is too much pressure for children of this age and are not indicative of their future progress.
- Statutory SATS at the end of Key Stage 2. In Year 6, pupils take 6 papers in Reading, Maths and grammar, punctuation and spelling. The results from these are used to create league tables and compare schools.

Secondary

This stage covers Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4

Key Stage 3: Year 7 (Age 11-12) Year 8 (Age 12-13) Year 9 (Age 13-14)
Compulsory subjects in KS3 are

- English
- Maths
- Science
- History
- Geography
- Modern Foreign Languages
- Physical Education
- Citizenship
- Computing
- Design and Technology
- Art and Design
- Music

Schools must also provide:
Relationships, sex and health education - parents can ask for their children to be taken out of sex education
Religious education (RE) - parents can ask for their children to be taken out of the whole lesson or part of it.

Key Stage 4: Year 10 (Age 14-15) Year 11 (Age 15-16)

During Key Stage 4 most pupils work towards national qualifications - usually **GCSEs** but some children take IGCSEs, and others take functional skills assessments.

The compulsory national curriculum subjects are the 'core' and 'foundation' subjects.
Core subjects are:

- English
- Maths
- Science

Foundation subjects are:

- Computing
- Physical Education
- Citizenship

Schools must also offer at least one subject from each of these areas:

- Arts
- Design and Technology
- Humanities
- Modern Foreign Languages

They must also provide relationships, sex and health education, and religious education (RE) at Key Stage 4.

After taking their GCSEs, students can either:

- stay in education to move into Key Stage 5 (Age 16-18) either at a school or college to study towards A levels or B-Tec examinations. Some schools offer the International Baccalaureate.
- choose to go into apprenticeships at this age instead of remaining in education.

The education curriculum has undergone some changes in recent years due to changes of government and ideas on what it should include.

More information on the British education system

The British education system is the one of the most popular curriculums in the world, offered at 30% of international schools globally. However, there are some criticisms of it being too rigid with too many tests and that it is not able to promote critical and creative thinking alongside the emphasis of academic over practical skills. A high percentage of children leave school in the UK without literacy and numeracy skills, and this has been exacerbated by Covid.

In 2022, 41% of Year 6 pupils (275,000 11-year-olds) in England left primary school without meeting the expected standards in literacy and maths, according to researchers at the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) thinktank. That is 50,000 more than in 2019.There are also other issues within the education system in the UK currently, due to staffing shortages, high staff workloads, changes in expectations of assessments and rising levels of pupils needing Special Educational Needs & Disabilities (SEND) provision.

However, there are many excellent British schools offering a good education in the UK. For younger expat primary age children, it is an ideal opportunity for them to socialise and learn cross-cultural skills as well as bilingual skills too. Many expats successfully send their children to UK primary schools with excellent results but should consider choosing more selective schools for the secondary stage. Some choose to supplement a UK state education with a French school on a Saturday, some choose to send their child to an international school or a French school teaching the French curriculum full-time in the UK.

Additional links:
Find A French School
French Lycée Schools in the UK
Best French Schools in England 2026

How to evaluate a school

You can compare the performance of schools and college here: www.gov.uk/school-performance-tables.

You should also visit schools more than once to observe the children and discuss your needs with the headteacher and, if possible, speak to other parents about the school.

Key differences between French education and British education

French schools tend to be more teacher-centred, formal, and academically theoretical, with a strong emphasis on lectures, memorisation, discipline, and high-stakes written exams within a nationally standardised curriculum. British schools are generally more student-centred and flexible, encouraging discussion, group work, critical thinking, and continuous assessment alongside exams, with greater attention to pastoral care and individual development. In short, the French system prioritises intellectual rigour and structure, while the British system places more emphasis on engagement, skills, and student confidence.

PART V: THE PROGRESSIVE STAGES OF CULTURE SHOCK

Culture shock progresses slowly. Not everyone will experience a severe case of culture shock, nor will all the symptoms be observed in any single individual. Many people sail through culture shock with relative ease, only now and again experiencing the more serious reactions. But many others don't.

For them it is important to know that 1) the responses outlined below can occur, 2) culture shock is in some degree inevitable and 3) their reactions are emotional and not easily subject to rational management. This knowledge should give those individuals a better understanding of what is happening to them and reinforce their resolve to work at hastening recovery.

Overall Symptoms

- Anxiety
- Homesickness
- Helplessness
- Boredom
- Depression
- Fatigue
- Confusion
- Self-doubt
- Feelings of inadequacy
- Unexplained fits of weeping
- Paranoia
- Physical ailments and psychosomatic illnesses

Withdrawal Symptoms

- Physical and/or psychological withdrawal
- Spending excessive amounts of time reading
- Need for excessive amounts of sleep
- Only seeing other British or Westerners
- Avoiding contact with host nation
- Short attention span
- Diminished productivity
- Quitting and returning home early

Aggressive Symptoms

- Compulsive eating
- Compulsive drinking
- Exaggerated cleanliness
- Irritability
- Family tensions
- Marital stress
- Excessive chauvinism
- Stereotyping
- Hostility towards hosts
- Verbal aggressiveness
- Physical aggressiveness
- Deciding to stay but permanently hating the country and its people

There are distinct stages of personal adjustment which virtually everyone who lives abroad goes through. These stages are:

- Initial euphoria
- Irritability and hostility
- Gradual adjustment
- Adaptation

Responding to Culture Shock

Granted that culture shock is virtually inevitable in some degree, there are some positive steps that you can take to minimise the impact and the sooner you take them the better.

1. Realise that practically everybody experiences culture shock in some form and/or to some degree. It's natural and not a sign that you are deficient or strange.

2. Be ready for the lesson culture shock teaches. Culture is a survival mechanism which tells its members not only that their ways of doing things are right but also that they are superior. Culture shock stems from an in-depth encounter with another culture in which you learn to the contrary that there are different ways of doing things that are neither wrong nor inferior.

3. Reread these notes when you are feeling down or uncertain about what is happening.

4. Develop a plan and daily schedule for doing your research and use all the native informants, sympathetic expatriates and helpful books you can find.

5. Select one or two areas of interest and investigate them more thoroughly that the other topics. If you are a fan of village cricket, don't just miss the games but cultivate an interest in football or other national sports.

6. Begin (if you haven't consciously done so yet) looking for logical reasons behind everything in the host country which seems strange, difficult, confusing or threatening. Search for patterns and interrelationships. Relax your grip on your own culture a little.

7. Try to trace every 'strange' action you observe in your new culture to its underlying values. For example, an Egyptian visitor to the UK was shocked at what he witnessed in a gift shop in one of London's museums. There he saw a young mother squatting to bring herself down to more or less the eye level of what he took to be her six year old son. He overhead her saying to him "Now Thomas, if you buy that model, then you're not go to have enough money to buy a drink when your sister wants to stop and have a Coke later in the morning and then you are going to be very unhappy".

No Egyptian mother would have said such a thing as the little boy would not have been given his 'own' money to spend; nor when he failed to spend it for what the mother thought he should, would she intervene to teach him how best to spend it. The Egyptian mother would have held on to the money, then when her son wanted the model, she would have bought it for him; then later, when he and his sister wanted a drink, she would have bought them a drink, then when they wanted something else, she would have brought it for them.

He could see that it was 'natural' for the mother to act the way she did and from his he was able to identify several British values in action:

- Independence
- Self-help and individual responsibility
- Future orientation
- Delayed gratification
- Control over oneself and one's environment

In the same way, the interactions you observe in the foreign culture can reveal that country's values.

8. Make a list of all the positive things you can identify about your present situation. (Ignore the negative - which you've probably been concentrating on too much anyway). Then tack the list up somewhere so that you can see it during the course of the day.

9. Avoid those individuals who are in a permanent state of culture shock and who spend their days seeking company to commiserate with. Finding new people to infect with their illness is the only way they have of providing their negative analysis of the host country is correct.

10. Don't succumb to the temptation to disparage the host culture yourself. Resist making jokes and comments. They only reinforce shaky feelings and slow down the process of adaptation. Avoid other people who make such jokes too.

11. On the other hand, work at maintaining a healthy sense of humour. Especially be ready to laugh at yourself. It's one of the best antidotes to culture shock there is. Making silly mistakes because of your unfamiliarity with the culture may cause you to feel foolish or childish, but the embarrassment will pass. Share your gaffes will family and friends and get them out of your system with a good laugh.

12. Find someone who has been there longer, gone through culture shock and has a positive attitude towards the host country and use this person as a sounding board to help you get some perspective on the experience you are having.

13. Make friends with host nationals and try to develop a deeper, more intimate relationship with one or two of them. Discuss with them the problems you have been having, taking care to present them in a way that doesn't sound like you are criticising their culture.

14. When you look for advice, focus on how you are feeling – what is going on inside you – rather than what you consider the causes of your problems, especially when you are inclined to think they lie in what is wrong with your host culture.

15. As you adjust to and function more comfortably within the value system of your host country, don't worry that you may lose your own values. This is a thought that comes quite naturally at some point or other to most people who live abroad. Your values are much deeper and permanent than that.

16. Keep busy, keep active, keep your mind occupied. Don't sit around and feel sorry for yourself.

17. During the deepest plunges into culture shock, take a trip – get away to a scenic spot or a nearby country. When you return, be open to having a good 'home coming' feeling.

18. Prepare some kind of presentation about your country, using slides, film or other kinds of visuals. Become an 'unofficial ambassador' whose mission is to correct some of the misconceptions about your own country.

19. Even during the worst times have faith in yourself that you will work your way through culture shock to the brighter days that lie ahead – even if you do nothing but wait. Effective cross-cultural adaptation has a way of creeping up on you bit by bit.

20. If your spouse has accompanied you but is not working outside the home, be especially concerned about his/her welfare. Non-working spouses can soon become bored and dissatisfied if they are not challenged to get out and explore the new environment.

Personal Coping Strategy

Visualise yourself recently arrived and settling-in well. In what ways should you attempt to orient yourself after you are actually in-country? Here are a few suggestions:

1. ***Start*** with your apartment, home, office – whatever is your spatial centre and work out from there in more or less concentric circles:

(a) what places are in the immediate vicinity – shops, services, offices etc.?
(b) who inhabits the places nearby? The poor, the rich, the working classes? Are they friendly, hostile or neutral?
(c) locate other speakers of your language

2. ***Next***, explore further into the neighbourhood nearby. Locate:

(a) restaurants and other places where people gather
(b) transportation
(c) government offices, the post office, the police, schools, administrative offices etc.

3. ***Begin*** to learn the basic names and phrases that appear on the signs, the names of foods or services. Learn to read the street signs and feel comfortable with the money.

4. ***Look*** for the differences. Are needs met differently here from the way they are at home? Are things organised differently? What's the logic or custom behind the naming of streets? Are there different combinations of food or other goods in the stores or markets? What goods are displayed most prominently? What does that tell you? What buildings stand out? How do you get a taxi? Pay on a bus?

There is bound to be something vital to you that seems to be totally missing. Does this society ignore a basic human need? Don't panic. The need is probably met in a different way from what you are used to.

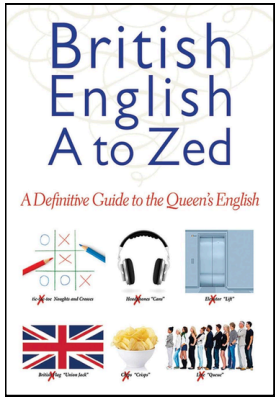
5. ***Talk*** to people. Identify friendly people and develop an acquaintanceship. Don't be afraid to ask questions (tactfully). Most people are keen to tell foreigners about their country. Go systematically into different shops or offices and be prepared to start a conversation.

6. ***Accept*** the help of others but… remember that living in another country stirs up complex emotions and responses. Each person's reactions are very nearly unique. It is therefore important not to let your perception of your host country be filtered too much through the eyes and experience of others.

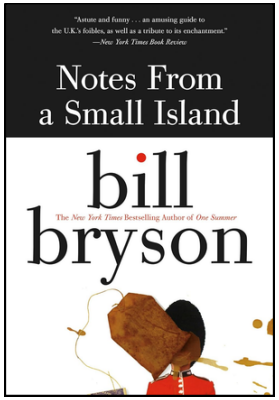
Accept their help and friendship but be wary of their opinions, especially if they focus excessively on the alleged shortcomings of the country. You don't need other people's worn-out prejudices and stereotypes.

PART VI: RECOMMENDED READING

Click on the images to lead you to the text.



British English from A to Zed: A Definitive Guide to the Queen's English
Norman W. Schur

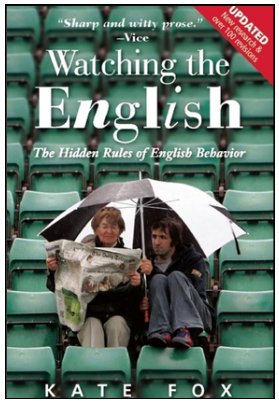


Notes from a Small Island
Bill Bryson

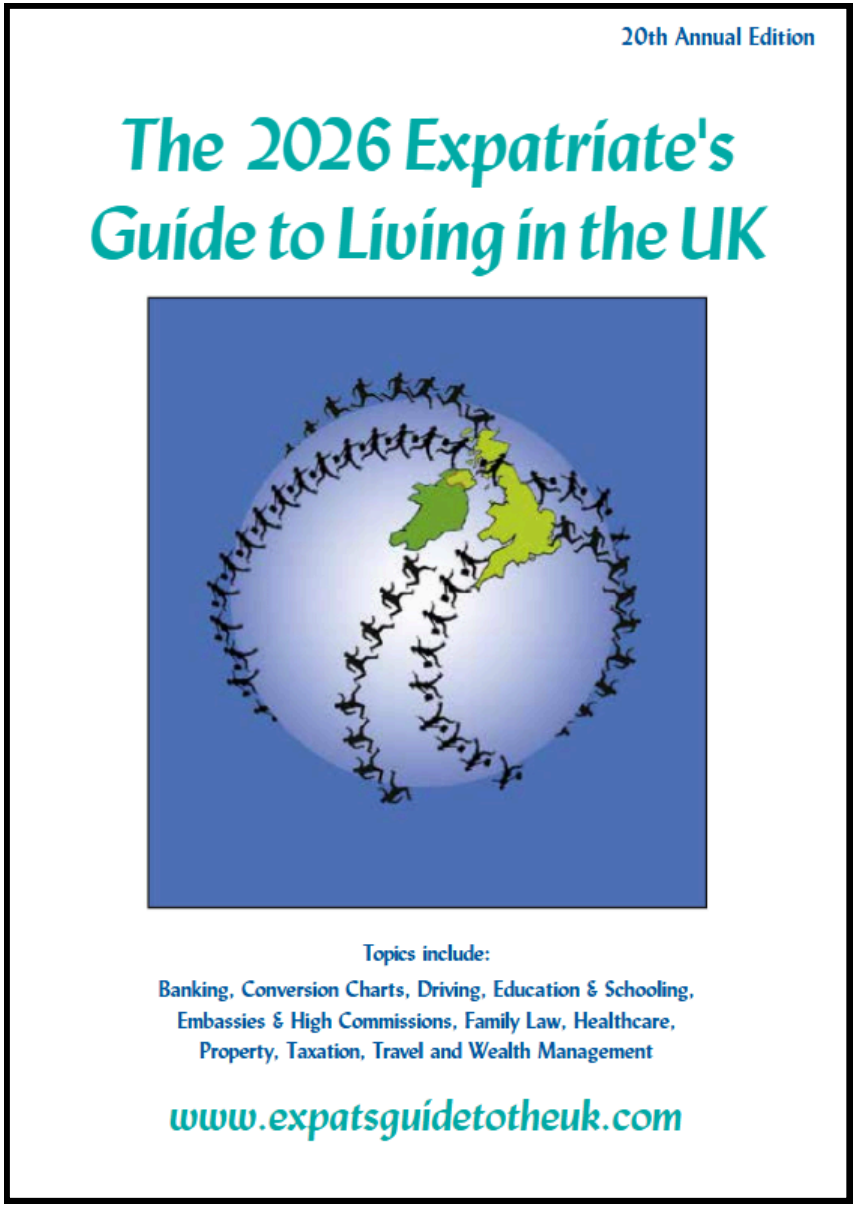
The Great British Bucket List: Utterly Unmissable Britain
Richard Madden

UK Migration, The Ultimate Guide To Moving To The UK
Kevin Noronha

Understanding the British: A hilarious guide from Apologising to Wimbledon
Adam Fletcher



Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour
Kate Fox



This resource can be found at the following address:

https://www.internationalhradviser.com/?p=guide.for.expatriates