

# MANIFESTO DI LONDRA

## THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE ITALIAN COMMUNITY IN THE UK

**New evidence, insights and  
recommendations**

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## Executive summary

We investigate the impact of the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic - from March to June 2020 - on the Italian community in the UK by gathering new evidence from a large online survey and a set of in-depth interviews. The survey and interviews were conducted by the "Manifesto di Londra", an independent progressive observatory of the Italian community founded in London in 2017.

The survey and interviews collected information on individual characteristics and personal circumstances of the respondents, as well as on several dimensions potentially affected by the pandemic, including citizenship rights, employment, health, international mobility, wellbeing and trust in media and government. The findings uncover some previously undocumented facts on the impact of Covid-19 on the Italian community in the UK.

First, the vast majority of respondents in our sample were actively working in February 2020, and they were distributed in sectors broadly in line with the corresponding AIRE figures. The pandemic had a significant economic impact on them: 34% of our respondents declared that their employment situation changed as a result of the pandemic. Among these, 52% were furloughed, whereas 15% - mainly self-employed - saw a drastic reduction of activity. Also, 37% of our respondents declared that their economic situation had worsened, with 51% of respondents having received some form of financial help: 78% of these accessed programs offered by the British government, such as the Universal Credit or the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (commonly known as 'furlough scheme'), especially in the sectors most impacted by the crisis, such as hospitality, building, and manufacturing.

One-third of our respondents believed they could have got Covid-19, but they were not sure about it, while 10% were certain they had contracted the virus (with or without test). Nonetheless, the vast majority of our respondents did not take any Covid-19 test (89%) and did not seek any medical advice (70%); of those who sought advice, 4% were not able to access any help. About half of our respondents (50%) rated the quality of the received medical advice or service either poor or very poor.

While the vast majority of our respondents (90%) did not go back to Italy because of the Covid-19 crisis, a significant portion did (9%). This is in line with some indirect estimates made by the Italian Consulate in London suggesting that, from the beginning of the pandemic until the end of April, approximately 30,000 Italians (nearly 10% of the total of Italians listed in the AIRE figures) went back to Italy. Furthermore, many Italians living in the UK have changed their life plans following the Covid-19 pandemic. When asked whether the pandemic made them reconsider their plans to continue living in the UK, less than half of our respondents (47%) said they would still prefer to live in the UK. More than one in 10 respondents (12%) said that the pandemic had persuaded them to leave the UK while they did not intend to do so before the pandemic.

We conclude by discussing some of the policy gaps and recommendations motivated by our findings, including the additional challenges to securing citizenship rights and to accessing healthcare, social care, and welfare benefits posed by the combination of the Covid-19 pandemic and Brexit.

## Foreword

The Manifesto di Londra (MdL) is an independent progressive observatory founded in London in 2017 and incorporated as a socio-political association in 2019. It aims to:

- defend and represent the interests and the values of the Italian citizens living in the United Kingdom and Ireland, safeguarding the values of integration and solidarity, both in Italy and on the British Isles;
- build a platform to foster the development of political and cultural initiatives and events for the Italian community in the United Kingdom and Ireland, focused on democracy, antiracism and internationalism and promoting the principles of gender equality, inclusivity and participation;
- create a community based on socialist, green, feminist, and pro-European principles, promoting relationships and collaboration between Italian and British progressives.

Since 2017, MdL has created opportunities for Italians in the UK to meet, discuss and be politically active. At the beginning of 2020, MdL has started a new project aimed at giving visibility and voice to Italian migrants in the Italian public and political debate. As Covid-19 struck, MdL was forced to rethink its ways of meeting and doing activism together. This report and the research that underpins it is the demonstration that it is possible to do so even during a pandemic.

The report has received the patronage of the Comites of London. Comites stands for “Comitato degli Italiani all'Estero” (Com. It. Es.) and is a representative assembly of the Italian community abroad. There is a Comites for every community of Italians abroad larger than 3,000 citizens. The Comites of London represents Italians in England (excluding the Manchester area) and in Wales. The Comites collaborates with Italian institutions, including the Consulate in London, to respond to the social, cultural and civil needs of the Italian community. It is elected every 5 years by registered Italians in England and Wales and it is supported by the Italian government.

The Italian Consulate of London and INCA CGIL have contributed to the report providing data, information and insights on the Italian community in the UK and the challenges it faces. The MdL is thankful for their valuable support.



## 1. Introduction

Throughout 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about an enormous loss of human lives, a severe and ongoing global public health emergency and significant disruptions to virtually all human activities across the planet. Consequences on the physical and mental health, the work and social life of billions of human beings have been unprecedented. Despite that vaccines are starting to be distributed in some countries, the pandemic will likely accompany our lives for many more months to come, if not years. Its implications will profoundly reshape the economic, political and cultural institutions governing society.

Whilst reaching virtually every inhabited part of the world in the first month of 2020, the pandemic spread unevenly across different countries. Different starting points in emergency preparedness against epidemics, and different responses from the governments resulted in some countries being more affected than others.

While most research on the impact of the pandemic focuses on the effects on populations' health and economy in different countries, relatively little attention has been given to the impact on the different communities within a country. Even less attention has been given to the impact on migrant communities, which for their nature are more fragile and mobile. As the pandemic has dramatically curtailed the freedom of movement of citizens worldwide, migrant communities have experienced dramatic disruptions in their lives.

In this report we investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Italian community in the United Kingdom. As a result of the pandemic, both the United Kingdom and Italy experienced two of the most severe public health and economic crises in the world. Italians in the United Kingdom went through particularly difficult months as both their country of origin, and their country of residence were in a state of prolonged emergency.

In the UK in particular, the pandemic triggered a profound economic depression which have been unfolding at the same time as the last stages of the Brexit process. As a result, European communities in the UK have experienced unprecedented levels of uncertainty over the terms of their permanence in the country.

There are 440,000 Italians officially resident in the UK in 2020: it is the third largest community of European Union citizens living in the UK, after the Polish and the Romanian. Since 2017, the Manifesto di Londra (henceforth MdL) has sought to raise the voice and the visibility of Italians living abroad in the Italian public debate and political discussion, demanding greater attention and policy response to their needs. The combination of Brexit and Covid-19 has made this agenda more urgent and pressing than ever.

With this report, we aim to draw the attention to a community in distress and provide evidence for an informed debate on what policy responses are needed at the Italian and the British level to support citizens caught between the double crises of Covid-19 and Brexit. More broadly, we want to use the opportunity offered by these double crises to start a discussion on what policies are needed to manage Italian and European migration in a way that enhance social justice and international solidarity.

To these ends, we conducted a large online survey and a series of in-depth interviews, reaching more than 1,000 people. The investigation was conducted in June 2020 and captures the impact of the first wave of the pandemic, uncovering some previously undocumented facts of interest. As we write, in December 2020, the final stages of the UK-European Union negotiations are still ongoing, and their outcome is still uncertain.

The report has four main objectives:

- Assess the health and economic impact of Covid-19 on the Italian community in the UK, and capture how these are affected by the status of European migrant;
- Document the disruptions brought about by Covid-19 to international mobility and citizens' rights, and how these disruptions are magnified by the specific challenges posed by Brexit;
- Understand how the double crises of Covid-19 and Brexit is influencing the medium- and long-term plans of the Italian community in the UK;
- Identify key unaddressed needs of this community (with a particular focus on the most vulnerable) and policy gaps, and start outlining an adequate policy response to the double crisis, with recommendations for Italian, British and European institutions.

Despite focusing exclusively on the Italian community, the issues raised by this report are common to all migrant European citizens, and our results are likely to hold for other European communities in the UK too. Accordingly, some of the needs identified would demand policy responses at the European Union level.

Anticipating the most striking results of the report, we found that:

- A total of 43% of our respondents either thought they had Covid-19, even though they did not take a test, or that they may have had it. However, 70% of them did not seek any medical advice. Among those who did seek advice, about half of our respondents rated the quality of the received medical advice or care service either poor or very poor. At the same time, Italians on the AIRE records who have temporarily returned to Italy during the pandemic are at risk of not having access to public health care.
- The pandemic is triggering a new wave of migration back to Italy, with about 9% of our respondents having gone back to Italy because of Covid-19. Combined with the uncertainty concerning Brexit, the pandemic is forcing many Italians living in the UK to reconsider their plans to continue living in the UK, by either returning to Italy or moving to another country. Italians who have temporarily left the UK without having already obtained the Settled Status risk losing their eligibility to obtain it upon their return.
- The economic impact on the Italian community in the UK has been significant, with a third of our respondents having seen their employment situation change because of the pandemic, and 37% having seen it worsen. The impact has been stronger for those on short-term migration and temporary contracts, and more generally less integrated in the UK context.
- The combination of Covid-19 and Brexit is generating previously undocumented anxiety and distrust of the way the UK government has dealt with the health policy response to the pandemic.

The rest of the report is organised as follows: **section 2** sets the ground providing an overview of the Italian presence in the UK before Covid-19 and the challenges that they were already facing because of Brexit; **section 3** discusses the methodological approach of our study; **section 4** describes the main characteristics of our sample; **section 5** focuses on the impact of Covid-19 on people's health and wellbeing; **section 6** deals with disruption in international mobility and citizens' rights; **section 7** analyses the economic impact on the Italian community; **section 8** offers insights on people's trust in the government and media during the first wave; **section 9** highlights the main policy gaps identified by our analysis and proposes some preliminary recommendations on how to address the most pressing issues related to access to healthcare, social care, income support and welfare benefits, and citizenship rights. **Section 10** concludes.

## 2. An overview of the Italian presence in the UK before Covid-19

Official figures show that the Italian presence in the UK has been on the rise in recent years. The number of Italians in the UK registered in the *Anagrafe degli Italiani Residenti all'Estero* (AIRE - Registry Office of the Italian Citizens Residing Abroad) doubled from just over 200 thousand units (206,598) at the beginning of 2012 to nearly 415 thousand (412,722) at the end of March 2020 (+100%).

These figures are likely to underestimate the true number of Italians in the UK. AIRE registrations recorded after the Brexit referendum in June 2016 account for approximately two-thirds of this increase, as many Italians who arrived in the country before 2016 sought to regularise their position toward the Italian state in an attempt to safeguard the right to stay in the UK after its withdrawal from the European Union.<sup>1</sup>

Despite registering on the AIRE records being mandatory for all Italian nationals who are born or live abroad for at least 12 months, there is an undetermined, yet substantial, number of Italians who never register. It is not possible to estimate with precision the number of Italian citizens in the UK because different available sources (AIRE registration, NIN applications, EU Settlement Scheme registrations) count different cohorts of people, with some exclusions and partial overlapping between them.

The Italian Embassy in London estimates that there may be up to 700,000 Italians living in the UK.

Reasons why people do not register on the AIRE records include: lack of adequate information about the process and the guarantees and rights connected to it; unawareness that it is a duty of every Italian residing abroad; uncertainty about length of processing time, especially for Italians who move for short periods of times or who are uncertain about the length of their stay; attempts to dodge or evade taxes (e.g. on property houses).

People who permanently move abroad and do not register on the AIRE records are completely unknown to the local Consulate and they may incur in delays and barriers in using consular services: for instance, they are unable to apply for identity and travel documents (identity card or passport) outside of Italy.

### 2.1 The Italian Consulates in the UK

As a consequence of the increasing number of Italian citizens living in the UK, the Italian Consulate network has experienced substantial pressure on its services in the last decade. However, such increased workload was initially not paralleled by an equal reinforcement of the consular services. On the contrary, the 2007-2008 financial crisis led the cabinet of then prime minister Mario Monti (2011-2013) to block the turnover of civil servants, including those employed in diplomatic missions, causing a reduction of the workforce at the Consulates and the closure of the Consulate in Manchester in 2014. The Italian consular network currently includes the Consulate General in London, in charge of the Italians in England and Wales, and the Consulate General in Edinburgh, for Scotland and Northern Ireland.<sup>2</sup> It has been recently announced that the Consulate in Manchester is going to

<sup>1</sup> As discussed in the following sections, being on the AIRE record on its own does not guarantee the right to stay in the UK after Brexit.

<sup>2</sup> Atto Camera, interrogazione a risposta in commissione 5/04/04800

<https://aic.camera.it/aic/scheda.html?numero=5/04800&ramo=CAMERA&leg=18>

reopen to ease the load of the existing network, but plans have been postponed due to the pandemic.

The restricted access to consular services negatively affects the Italians living in the UK. For example, long waiting times to access key consular services such as issuance of identity and travel documents, can imply delay and difficulties in starting a new job, accessing benefits from the British government and disruption of travel plans.

Immediately before the first deadline for the UK's withdrawal from the European Union in March 2019, the Italian Parliament passed the "Brexit Decree," which included measures to support the consular services. The Decree provided funds to hire several administrators in the various offices, to increase the contribution of diplomatic officers in the consular network, and to improve operations.

This has allowed to significantly reduce the waiting time for most administrative tasks and to organise, together with the COMITES, an information campaign on Settled Status which reached tens of thousands of Italians.<sup>3</sup>

## 2.2 Freedom of movement after Brexit: the Settled Status and the points-based immigration system

The upcoming Brexit deadline poses another set of challenges for the Italian (and other European) community, beyond the uncertainty over the future of the country. As agreed in the Withdrawal Agreement, signed by UK and the EU in January 2020, all EU citizens in the UK (and their non-EU family members) must apply to the EU Settlement Scheme to retain the same rights (as they have now) after the end of the transition period (31st December 2020), which will officially see the UK leaving the European Union.

EU citizens who have legally resided in the UK for at least 5 continuous years will be granted Settled Status (Indefinite Leave to Remain, ILR); those who have resided in the UK for less than 5 years will be granted a pre-Settled Status (Temporary Leave to Remain). Pre-settled Status expires 5 years after it is granted, and it is meant to give citizens the time to accumulate 5 years of continuous residence. All citizens who entered the UK by 31st December 2020 have the right to apply to the EU Settlement Scheme, and have up until 30th of June 2021 to do so.

While the application was made free of charge and the procedure to apply simplified and streamlined (following a backlash against the initial, more cumbersome, procedure), several of issues persist.

First, some people still see their application rejected or their status downgraded to *pre-settled* as years of continuous residency are not recognised by the Home Office. This mainly affects vulnerable citizens who are out of work or education, often relatives or partners involved in home care. These same citizens who had residency issues and were granted Pre-Settled Status instead of Settled Status, also saw their access to welfare curtailed, a problem that has been particularly relevant since the start of the pandemic.

Second, a larger number of people are unaware of the need to apply. These are mostly young and precarious citizens of most recent (post-Brexit) immigration, and older Italian citizens who spent most of their lives in the UK and therefore believe that they do not need to apply. Even though elderly citizens may have been granted ILR (Indefinite Leave to

<sup>3</sup> EU Settlement Scheme: lettera del Consolato Generale e Comites di Londra a tutti gli over 65, Consolato Generale d'Italia Londra, 9/12/2020 [https://consolondra.esteri.it/consolato\\_londra/it/la\\_comunicazione/dal\\_consolato/2020/12/eu-settlement-scheme-lettera-del.html](https://consolondra.esteri.it/consolato_londra/it/la_comunicazione/dal_consolato/2020/12/eu-settlement-scheme-lettera-del.html)



Remain) in the past, the Home Office strongly recommends they apply because they may struggle to demonstrate that they meet the requirements needed to obtain the Settled Status in the future.

Finally, there is a specific challenge for Italian citizens who went back to Italy at the beginning of the pandemic. They risk their qualifying residency time zeroed if they spend more than 6 months outside of the UK (even if not continuously), making their return to the UK more difficult. Depending on when they first arrived and when they were granted Pre-Settled Status, this can be a significant issue, with the risk of people having to re-enter the UK under the new immigration rules in place from the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2021. This includes people who lost their job in the UK at the start of the pandemic, as well as people who went back to Italy to work and study remotely, or to take care of parents, relatives, partners or friends, waiting for the pandemic to be over before returning to the UK.

From the 1st January 2021, when Brexit comes into effect, freedom of movement to the UK for European citizens will end, and the UK will introduce a points-based immigration system. Italians who want to move to the UK and do not have Settled or Pre-settled status, will have to do so abiding by this new system. Under the points-based immigration system, work visas will be granted to those who earn enough 'points'. Points will be acquired by meeting a set of requirements, including: having a job offer, being fluent in English and receiving a salary of at least £25,600 per year. Additional points will be given to those who earn above the salary threshold, have a PhD or are applying for a job category designated as 'in shortage' by the Migration Advisory Committee.<sup>4</sup>

The system is explicitly designed to attract skilled workers and discourage entry of unskilled workers.<sup>5</sup> It has been highly criticised for failing to recognise the critical role that unskilled migrant workers play in the British economy. Migrant workers represent approximately 23% of all health staff, including 29% of doctors and 18% of nurses;<sup>6</sup> 20% of agricultural workers;<sup>7</sup> more than 40% of food production workers and 18% of care workers, rising to 59% in London.<sup>8</sup> The limits and contradictions of the system have become especially evident since the explosion of the pandemic, as health, care and unskilled workers were raised to the rank of heroes in the government's rhetoric,<sup>9</sup> while little was done to support them.<sup>10</sup> For instance, during the pandemic migrant health and care workers continued to have to pay a surcharge of £400 to access the NHS. After a campaign by trade unions the government promised to scrap the surcharge for health and care workers but at the time of writing, the measure has not come to full effect yet.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>4</sup> UK points-based immigration system: employer information, UK Visas and Immigration <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-points-based-immigration-system-employer-information/the-uk-points-based-immigration-system-an-introduction-for-employers>

<sup>5</sup> UK to close door to non-English speakers and unskilled workers, The Guardian, 18/02/2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/feb/18/uk-to-close-door-to-non-english-speakers-and-unskilled-workers>

<sup>6</sup> International migration and the healthcare workforce, Office for National Statistics <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/articles/internationalmigrationandthehealthcareworkforce/2019-08-15>

<sup>7</sup> Migrant workers and coronavirus: risks and responses, IPPR, 25/03/2020 <https://www.ippr.org/blog/migrant-workers-and-coronavirus>

<sup>8</sup> Moved to care: the impact of migration on the adult social care workforce, Independent Age <https://www.independentage.org/policy-research/research-reports/moved-to-care-impact-of-migration-on-adult-social-care-workforce>

<sup>9</sup> You Clap for Me Now: the coronavirus poem on racism and immigration in Britain, The Guardian, 15/07/2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/global/video/2020/apr/15/you-clap-for-me-now-the-coronavirus-poem-on-racism-and-immigration-in-britain-video?fbclid=IwAR37Asr53unhiwV8aswXUvLzYGh134WCLQ-4h-mta3DZX905nR9V7fZ8>

<sup>10</sup> While 'low-skilled' migrants are saving us, the government is cracking down on them, The Guardian, 11/04/2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/11/low-skilled-migrants-government-cracking-down>

<sup>11</sup> Migrant healthcare staff still paying NHS fee despite Johnson U-turn, The Guardian, 15/06/2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jun/15/migrant-healthcare-staff-still-paying-nhs-fee-despite-johnson-u-turn>

### 3. Reaching out to the Italian community in distress: a mixed-methods approach

This section outlines the methodological approach that we employed for our investigation, including its strengths and limitations.

To investigate the impact of Covid-19 on the Italian community in the UK, we designed an online anonymous survey aimed at gathering information on some key dimensions, such as citizenship rights, employment, health, and international mobility.

The survey was disseminated between the 6th and the 24th June 2020 through social media, email, and one-to-one communications, obtaining 1,056 responses. The majority of respondents were reached through the MdL's Facebook page and through Facebook groups of Italians living in London and the UK. The reliance on these channels to reach survey respondents is likely to have biased our sample toward the sub-sample of the Italian population in the UK that tends to fall in the age bracket 25-40, has higher levels of education, and regularly uses social media. Therefore, when interpreting the results of our survey it is important to keep in mind that the pool of respondents is not fully representative of the Italian population in the UK, or at least of the Italians registered on the official AIRE records.

The analysis of the survey data was conducted with the whole sample of respondents, with the only exclusion of the few respondents who turned out not to be Italian citizens. This exclusion gave a final sample of 1,038 responses which were used for the data analysis. The analysis consisted of descriptive statistics for each survey question, pairwise correlations, standard parametric and non-parametric tests (e.g. t-tests, Mann-Whitney tests), and formal regression analysis (mainly linear regression models, but also binary or ordered probit models, where appropriate). All the statistical analysis was conducted using Stata.

The survey also included an open-ended question which allowed respondents to further express their thoughts on a variety of issues. These answers are used throughout the report to complement and enrich the quantitative results of the survey (these are found in boxes with 'insights from respondents,' and are anonymous, as the survey was).

#### 3.1 Interviews

To complement the data collected from the survey, 14 Italian citizens living in the UK were interviewed via phone. None of the interviewees belongs to the research team's close personal contacts; they were identified through word of mouth and snow-balling methods, focusing on people in employment categories of specific interest. In particular, they belong to the following categories:

- NHS (1)
- Retired (2)
- Transport (2)
- Education (1)
- Other (8)

The interviewees were asked a series of open-ended questions concerning the impact of Covid-19 on their employment situation, their health, their trust in the Government and feelings toward Brexit and their plans for the future.

The interviews are used throughout the report to provide additional insights on the impact of Covid-19 on the Italian community in the UK and to complement and corroborate the survey findings.<sup>12</sup>

## 4. Demographic characteristics of the survey respondents

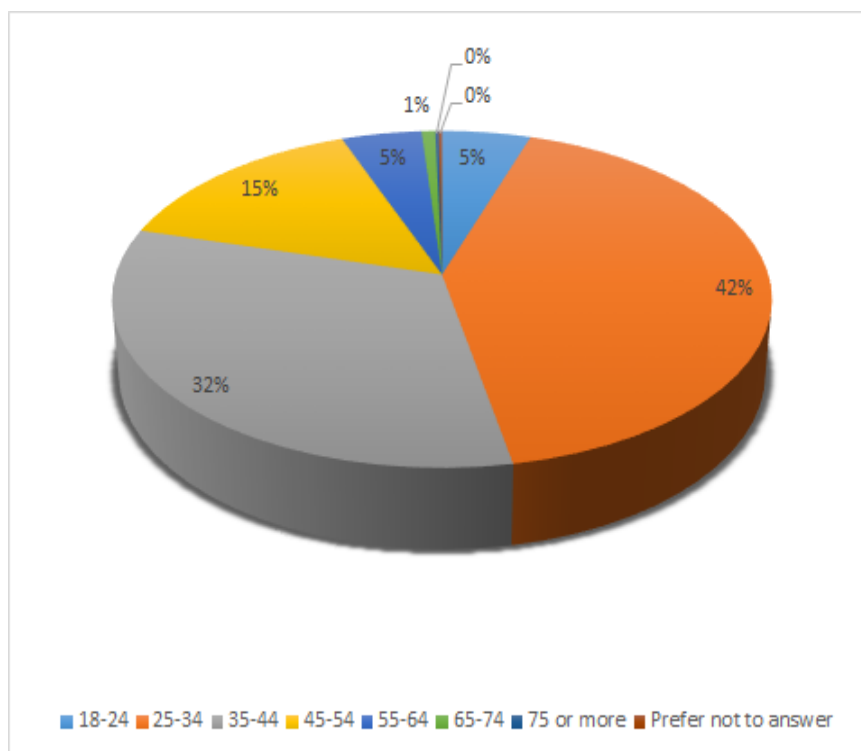
The vast majority of the respondents to our survey live in the UK (86%), 13% live in Italy, and the rest live in another EU country or preferred not to answer that question.

As already anticipated, there are some differences between our sample and the whole population of Italians living in the UK according to the AIRE records.

First, respondents to our survey identify themselves predominantly as women (70% of the sample) with men being 29% of the sample. That is in contrast with the AIRE records, which show that male citizens are slightly more numerous than female ones, 53% vs 47%.

Second, the respondents are younger than the official statistics average. In our sample, 42% are 25-34 years old and 32% are 35-44 years old. Older respondents are almost not represented in our sample, most likely because our survey was circulated via social media (for full age-brackets break down see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Age distribution of Italians citizens surveyed**



<sup>12</sup> Unlike survey responses and open comments, extracts from interviews are not fully anonymised because we obtained permission from interviewees to mention their name, employment, age and years spent in the UK.

Note: Own elaboration based on the survey's answers

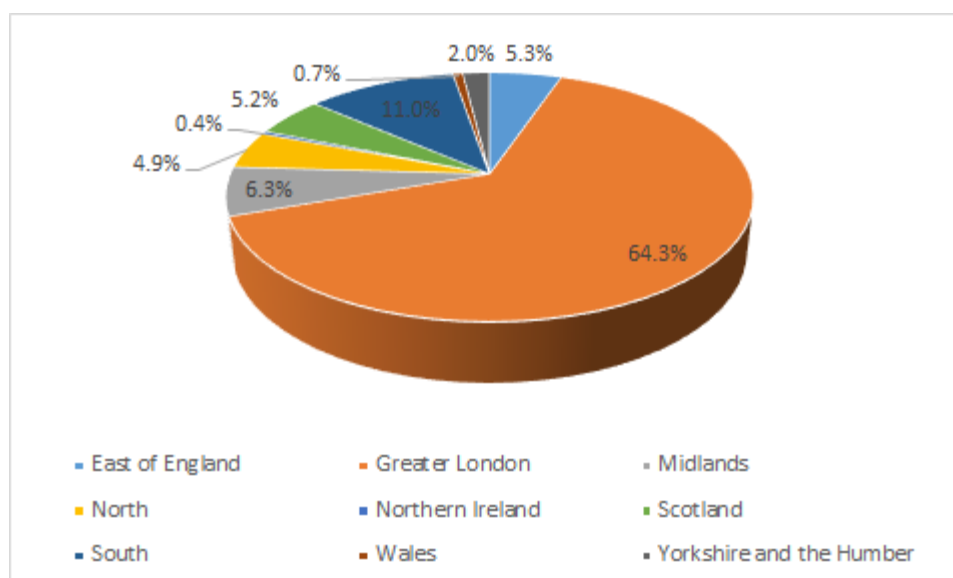
According to the AIRE records, Italians living in the UK are more homogeneously distributed across age groups (see Table 1), with 16.5% of people between 18 and 30 years old and 21% between 31 and 40 years old.

**Table 1. Age distribution of Italians on AIRE records**

Age bracket	Share of the population on AIRE records at April 2020
< 17	19%
18-30	16.5%
31-40	20.5%
41-50	18%
51-60	11%
61-70	5%
>71	9%

Third, our sample is heavily geographically skewed. Out of the 967 respondents who reported their location in the UK, 622 are from the Greater London area (64%). However, according to the Italian Consulate in London, only about 40% of the Italians enrolled on the AIRE records were living in the Greater London area in April 2020.

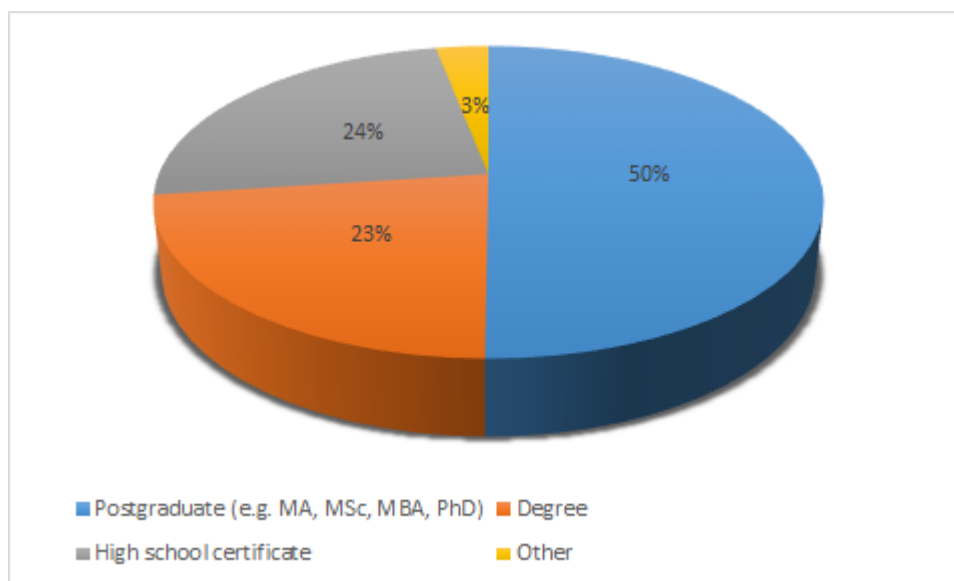
**Figure 2. Geographical distribution of the respondents**



Note: Own elaboration based on the survey's answers

Furthermore, our sample also over-represents respondents with higher education: almost half of our sample (50%) has a graduate ('post laurea') qualification (e.g. MA, MSc, MBA, PhD). Figure 3 shows the whole distribution. According to the Italian Consulate in London, only 37% of the Italians enrolled on the AIRE records have either a degree or a graduate qualification, whereas 57% have a high-school diploma or a lower educational achievement.

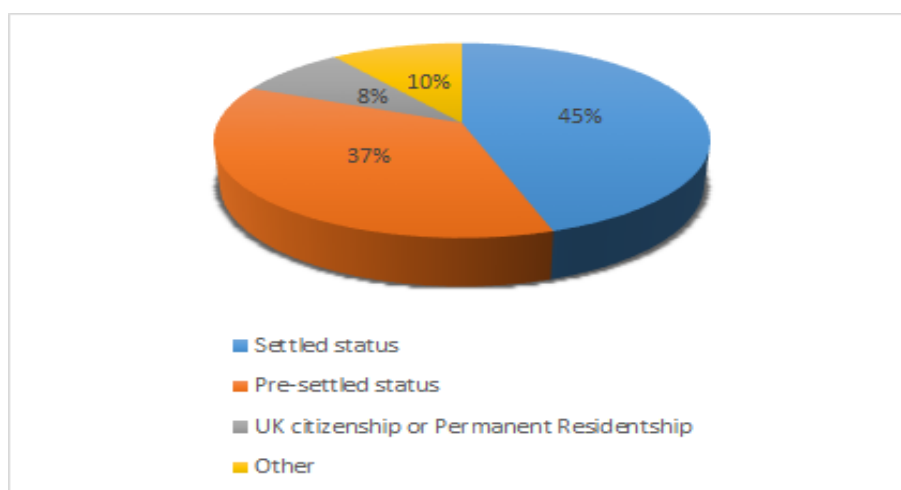


**Figure 3. Survey's respondents by level of study**

Note: Own elaboration based on the survey's answers

The vast majority of our respondents are registered on the AIRE records: out of 1,038 eligible respondents, 867 are registered (84%), 140 are not (13%), and 31 did not answer the question (3%). Among the respondents reporting to live in the UK, 95% joined the AIRE. People who are not registered tend to be those with temporary employment, shorter-term plans, and vulnerable situations. Our sample is unlikely to be representative of people in these situations.

The average respondent has been living in the UK for slightly over 8 years. Almost all those taking part in the survey have been in the country for more than 2 years, and about two-thirds of them (64%) have lived in the UK for more than 5 years. As such, most of our respondents are already eligible to obtain the Settled Status, granted by the UK Home Office. Figure 4 below clearly indicates such a pattern.

**Figure 4. Survey's Respondents by Legal Status in the UK**

Note: Own elaboration based on the survey's answers

## 5. Health and wellbeing

Unavoidably, health has been a major concern for everyone since the beginning of the pandemic. Our survey collected information on Covid-19's prevalence across our sample, as well as people's perception of the quality of the health assistance provided and more generally of the UK government's handling of the emergency. Findings on this last issue are particularly striking, as many respondents strongly expressed negative opinions of the British government and the NHS. We also find that Covid-19 had a large negative impact on people's mental health.

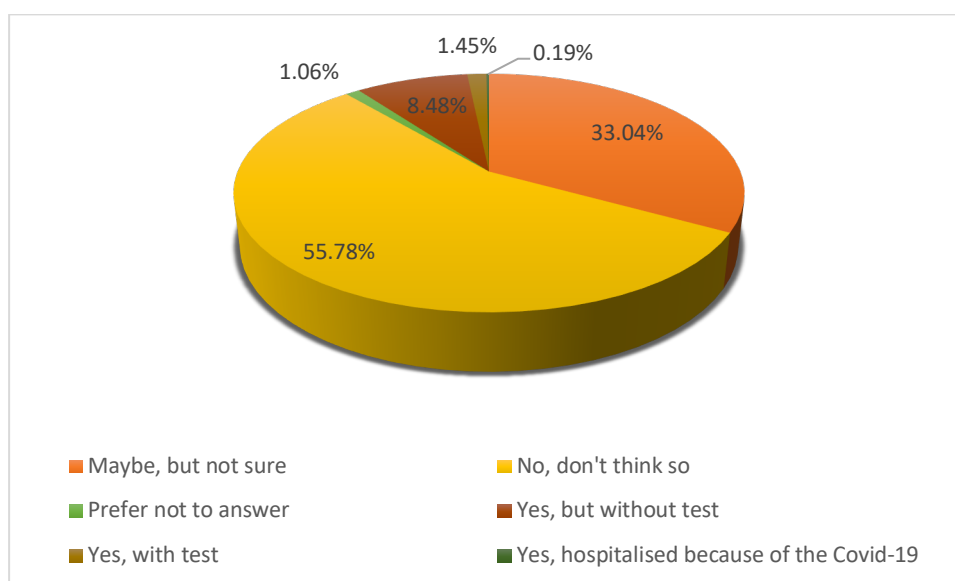
First, we sought to understand how many respondents got Covid-19. As can be seen from Figure 5, about 10% (105 out of 1,038 valid answers) of our sample are certain they have had the virus (with or without test), and a further 33% believe they may have gotten Covid-19 but they are not certain about it.

### Box 1. COVID-19 infection - insights from respondents

'Because of Covid, I had a high fever for three weeks, then I got tested in a private clinic to check I was no longer infected before going out.' **[Respondent #40, female, 45-54 years]**

'My family was affected by Covid-19 in March. We did not receive any medical support neither from the GP nor from 111. They neither got us tested nor did they give us any first aid. They told us to take some paracetamol. Luckily, we know Italian doctors here who helped us. England left us on our own and we felt offended and humiliated.' **[Respondent #190, female, 35-44 years]**

**Figure 5. Responses to the question:  
"Do you think you have already contracted Covid-19?"**



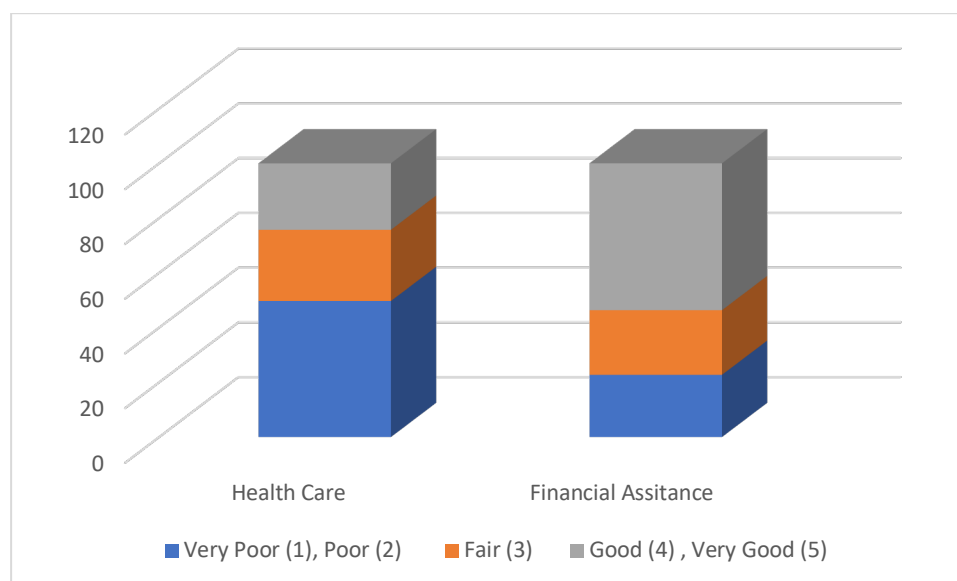
Note: Own elaboration based on the survey's answers

Despite the high number of people who thought they might be infected, 70% of our respondents did not seek any medical advice about Covid-19. Among those who did seek advice, about a third relied on their GP and more than half obtained advice by phone. Table 2 below presents the types of advice they received.

**Table 2. Medical advice sought by survey respondents**

None	70.14%
I tried to seek medical advice because of the Covid-19 but was not able to find any help.	4.24%
I received medical advice from my GP on the phone, possibly followed by other forms of medical advice.	9.58%
I received medical advice on the phone from the NHS.	7.21%
I received medical advice from public hospitals.	0.68%
I received A&E services.	0.48%
I received medical advice from friends/relatives.	3.77%
I received medical advice from a private clinic.	2.13

On a scale between 1 (very poor) and 5 (very good), our respondents rated the quality of the medical advice they received to be 2.5 on average, with about half of our respondents (49.71%) rating it either very poor (1) or poor (2). The data analysis suggests that there are no statistically significant patterns of associations between the level of satisfaction with the medical advice received and any of the individual characteristics described in section 4 (e.g. socio-demographics, level of education, years living in the UK, being registered on the AIRE records, residence in the UK).

**Figure 6. Survey respondents' evaluation of health care and financial assistance**

Note: Own elaboration based on the survey's answers

This general negative assessment is also found in the comments made in response to the open question in the survey and in the interviews. Many people expressed strong dissatisfaction with the NHS and distrust in the way the government was handling the pandemic.

### Box 2. Pandemic management - interviews

'I'm very disappointed with the way they handled the health emergency. Their conduct clearly showed the government's priorities during the pandemic (i.e. economy prevailing over health). The UK government had the chance to learn from the Italian scenario, yet they ignored it and did not take advantage of the extra time available for taking appropriate measures.' **[Andrea, 35, freelance consultant and researcher, 7 years in the UK]**

'Pandemic management was terrible, especially considering the UK had more time compared to other European countries to prepare for the virus spreading. Rather, they derided the Italian government's attitude. This drastically reduced my reliability on the UK government and I'm now much more uncertain about my future in this country.' **[Irene, 32, goods transport planner, 8 years in the UK]**

'The NHS was not prepared to deal with the pandemic, and we had barely any PPE, to begin with.' **[Anna, 41, occupational therapist assistant, 15 years in the UK]**



**Box 3. Pandemic management - insights from respondents**

'The government managed the pandemic situation very badly. He delegated responsibility to people rather than setting clear rules. This caused chaos and, in some instances, an excessive indifference. So, the effort of many was cancelled out by many others (see Cumming).' **[Respondent #132, male, 35-44 years]**

'I was deeply disappointed and worried by the way the UK government handled the pandemic from the health perspective. Insufficient and inaccurate information. I trust very little the few things they say, and I behaved based on the indications given by the Italian government. I believe people did not truly realise the COVID danger and how much each one of us can impact on others. For instance, parks were packed in May with people without masks on, who did not respect social distance, with no control at all (the UK government did not advise on using masks, only recently they said to wear them on public transport).' **[Respondent #204, female, 35-44 years]**

'The pandemic has highlighted many shortcomings on the part of the British government. I don't know if I was the only one to "idealise" England as if it were a promised land. I have now changed my mind a lot especially after this situation. I already had in mind to return to Italy and now I would like to do it even earlier. Although unfortunately, the Italian economic situation will now have worsened again.' **[Respondent # 91, female, 35-44 years]**

These sentiments reflect the objectively poor record in managing Covid-19 response, especially in the first months of the pandemic: when looking at excess deaths (the most reliable measure of the impact of a disease) in the period up to May 2020, England and Wales had the worst increase in the world.<sup>13</sup>

**Box 4. The health emergency response of the UK government to the first wave of Covid-19**

Due to the uneven spread of the pandemic amongst different countries, it is difficult to judge exactly the differences in governments' response to it. It is, however, a fact that the first wave of Covid-19 brought the UK to the top of the international statistics for the number of cases and number of deaths, both in absolute numbers and in relation to the population.

At the time our survey was launched, on 6<sup>th</sup> June, the UK Government had reported more than 40,000 deaths due to Covid-19<sup>14</sup>, the third-highest level of Covid-19 deaths in proportion to the population in the world. Many commentators who had the chance to scrutinise the UK Government's actions highlighted several catastrophic errors and a staggering level of complacency.<sup>15</sup>

In a symbolic coincidence, the Covid-19 pandemic officially arrived in Britain on the 31<sup>st</sup> of January, Brexit day, when two patients in Newcastle tested positive to Covid-19 tests upon their return from a trip to China. Yet, until 16<sup>th</sup> March, the Government's strategy was merely to "mitigate" the spread of Covid-19, following a protocol for a flu pandemic developed in 2011<sup>16</sup>, and only adopted more robust containment measures

<sup>13</sup> *Magnitude, demographics and dynamics of the effect of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic on all-cause mortality in 21 industrialized countries*, Kontis et al. Nat Med 26, 1919–1928 (2020) <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33057181/>

<sup>14</sup> a figure later revised to 38648 to include only people who died within 28 days of their positive test

<sup>15</sup> *A public inquiry on the UK government coronavirus response is necessary and urgent*, PRRUK, <https://prruk.org/a-public-inquiry-on-the-uk-government-coronavirus-response-is-necessary-and-urgent/> and *Coronavirus: 38 days when Britain sleepwalked into disaster*, The Times, 19 April 2020 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/coronavirus-38-days-when-britain-sleepwalked-into-disaster-hq3b9tqgh>

<sup>16</sup> *The UK Influenza Preparedness Strategy 2011*, Department of Health and Social Care, 10 November 2011 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/responding-to-a-uk-flu-pandemic>

following intense pressure from the scientific community and dramatic predictions of the likely death tolls if the government were to follow a “herd immunity” approach of minimal intervention. The UK was indeed the last among the largest European countries to announce a lockdown, on 23rd March, and was last in Europe in implementing virtually any containment measures, both when considering the absolute date of the announcement and when considering the date relative to the onset of the pandemic, as reported by a comparative analysis published by Politico<sup>17</sup>. This poor management continued even after lockdown: several reports documented lack of PPE for doctors and NHS workers, and discharge of infectious patients.<sup>18</sup>

Our interviews and open question responses suggest that besides contracting the virus, Covid-19 had a deep impact on the mental health of Italians in the UK. Distrust in the government was often accompanied by fear of not being treated if one contracted the virus, anxiety for one's family's health, and stress for the general situation of uncertainty and the prospects of the country.

#### Box 5. COVID-19-related mental health implications - interviews

'I live alone. Following the Italian situation via the media and updates from my family was traumatic. It felt like watching a futuristic movie, except it was real life. At work, I could not focus at all. If I could, I would have come back to Italy in May for my birthday. However, I was afraid of infecting my family as I could have been asymptomatic.' **[Irene, 32, goods transport planner, 8 years in the UK]**

'Italy cared much more about people's health than the UK. I was worried about the situation, not specifically for me. There is something peculiar to the expat's life, you always feel that you have two lives and the same is happening with the pandemic.' **[Sofia, 33, freelance production coordinator in the film industry, 9 years in the UK]**

'On the one hand, I felt anxious for my loved ones at home especially for my dad who works in a hospital, on the other I was anxious about the trip, the constant fear of flight cancellations, the fear of saying goodbye to friends and the possibility of catching the virus, the anxiety to leave my life halfway at any moment.' **[Francesco, 24, Erasmus student, 6 months in the UK]**

<sup>17</sup> Europe's coronavirus lockdown measures compared, Politico, 31 March 2020

<https://www.politico.eu/article/europes-coronavirus-lockdown-measures-compared/>

<sup>18</sup> Coronavirus: doctors call for inquiry into PPE shortages for NHS staff, The Guardian, 10 May 2020

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/may/10/coronavirus-doctors-call-for-inquiry-into-ppe-shortages-for-nhs-staff>

**Box 6. COVID-19-related mental health implications - insights from respondents**

'My psychological state is very bad, I can no longer leave the house relaxed because I don't feel safe and I prefer to stay at home. I am looking for a job but my enthusiasm is held back by a sort of apathy that has taken me since March, the month in which I had a miscarriage for which I blame British health care, I can no longer trust this institution despite being part of it.' **[Respondent #141, female, 35-44 years]**.

'I felt more anxious, the fear that something bad would happen to my parents, and that I could not return to Italy.' **[Respondent #111, female, 45-54 years]**.

'On a psychological level, it was like experiencing the pandemic once in Italy and once in the UK. Being worried twice, for the family in Italy and for the family here.' **[Respondent #84, female, 35-44 years]**.

It is interesting to note that a few people reported positive effects of the first lockdown on their wellbeing. This was mostly due to reduction in stress from work routine, more time availability, a chance to change of habits and organise one's life better, and the possibility to accumulate savings due to a drop in expenditures.

**Box 7. Positive impact on wellbeing - insights from respondents**

'The working conditions necessary for the period of the pandemic have improved both physically and mentally.' **[Respondent #126, female, 45-54 years]**

'I've never been so well. I have lost weight, I eat better, I sleep better, I exercise more. I took 5 certifications that I had left behind for a long time. I work from home, started 5 different businesses, built some furniture for the house on weekends, bought a new car and house and redone the whole garden.' **[Respondent #13, male, 35-44 years]**

'The quality of my life in terms of relations with my two-year-old daughter has improved a lot, and in economic terms, I am saving considerable sums as I do not have to pay for the transport to the office and the kindergarten fees, while my salary has remained unchanged.' **[Respondent #161, male, 35-44 years]**

## 6. The impact of Covid-19 on international mobility and citizenship rights

For Italians in the UK, Covid-19 has anticipated the disruptions in their citizenship rights that they are and will continue facing after Brexit. Many people who wanted to travel back at the height of the first wave of the pandemic (March to May 2020) were not able to do so. At the same time, the Covid-19 pandemic has led to the appearance of an unprecedented and significant migration flow back to Italy, involving both Italians who had been residing in the UK for only a short period when the pandemic started and people who had been living in the UK for several years.

**Box 8. Mobility restrictions: uncertainty on when it would be possible to visit the family – insights from interviews**

'Although I needed to, I did not go back to Italy. My sister, who is older than me, is scared I could infect her. I have nobody else who could host me and can't afford hotel rates, so I was forced to stay here.' **[Marisa, 70, retired, 42 years in the UK]**

'I live with my two kids who were in Italy when lockdown started. My daughter managed to come back straight away, while my son decided to stay for a bit longer and when the situation got worse he was too scared to travel. I would have preferred being in Italy during lockdown so that I could stay with my family. For the time being, I decided not to go back as it is too risky and this makes me feel so sad.' **[Anna, 41, occupational therapist assistant, 15 years in the UK]**

'Besides the lack of social life, which eventually affected me, the most annoying thing was the uncertainty about when I could go back to Italy to see my family and friends.' **[Andrea, 35, freelance consultant and researcher, 7 years in the UK]**

**Box 9. Mobility restrictions: uncertainty on when would have been possible to visit the family – insights from respondents**

'I would have liked to go home to stay with my parents. But it was impossible to return home from a logistical point of view and also out of a sense of responsibility it was better not to travel and put my loved ones at risk.' **[Respondent #204, female, 35-44 years]**

'The pandemic did not allow me to return to Italy to visit my family. Given the quarantine imposed by the British government (15 days), I don't know when this will be possible.' **[Respondent #151, male, 25-34 years]**

## 6.1 Constraints to returning to Italy for Italians in the UK

During the Covid-19 emergency, the Italian Government enacted a series of legislative measures aimed at containing the spread of the infection which *de facto* imposed unprecedented restrictions to the freedom of movement between countries, including for Italian citizens abroad.

The first endemic cases of Covid-19 were reported in Italy on the 21<sup>st</sup> February. "Red-zones" were initially enforced in 10 municipalities in Lombardy and one municipality in Veneto, and in additional 21 different districts in four regions after two weeks, as the infection continued to spread throughout Northern Italy. From the 10<sup>th</sup> March, a lockdown was implemented in the entire country. Airlines stopped flying to Italy, with several cancellations and thousands of people left stranded in the UK.

In March, the Italian government first introduced a compulsory 14-day period of self-isolation, with active surveillance by the local health authorities for all those entering the country; it subsequently restricted the possibility to enter Italy, only allowing entry to those with work or health-related reasons, emergencies, or students and unemployed people returning to their place of residency in Italy.

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> March, the British Government announced the enforcement of the lockdown for England. Most companies had to close and many services were interrupted. Several people lost their jobs, many others were put on furlough, students saw their universities shut down. More Italians - especially students and those who had lost their jobs - tried to travel

back to Italy to reduce their expenses and find the support of their families. While some managed to do so, many others were not able to find an affordable flight.

**Box 10. Mobility restrictions: lack of affordable flights - insights from respondents**

'We wanted to escape to Italy when it was still possible but Alitalia flights organised by the Farnesina were out of reach in terms of cost for a family. I'm not saying they should be free but not to take advantage of the situation.' **[Respondent #179, female, 45-54 years]**

'Being a student all my classes went online. Therefore I could have gone back to Italy right away, but I leave the day after tomorrow, after three cancelled flights.' **[Respondent #119, female, 25-34 years]**

'I am an Erasmus student and the university didn't make immediate decisions about online teaching. The news that arrived from Italy were often conflicting and the constant rumours about the government measures only exacerbated this state of suspension and anxiety. Therefore on 13 March, I returned to Italy with the last flight available.' **[Respondent #207, male, 18-24 years]**

Many Italians turned to the Consulate during this period. Different problems emerged as the severity of the Covid-19 infection increased until it was declared a pandemic on the 11<sup>th</sup> March. The Italian diplomatic mission responded to the crisis establishing additional emergency services to address the needs. The most common requests were about the different travel possibilities to Italy (flights operating and the possibility to move between different regions), but also about economic support to pay for flight tickets.

**Box 11. The response of the Italian diplomatic mission in the UK**

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Italian diplomatic mission in the UK (Embassy in London and Consulates in London and Edinburgh) continued and reinforced the assistance services offered. Offices were never closed, but they rearranged the way they offered their service so that they were accessible by making an appointment, giving priority to those in urgent need or in vulnerable conditions.

To answer all questions related to Covid-19 issues, both Consulates established a Covid-19 emergency task-force. Web pages collected all the information about how to locally get health and economic support from the British Government, travel information within the UK and Italy. A collaboration was established with the Italian clinic 'Dottore London' and with the Italian Medical Society of Great Britain (IMSoGB) to give medical advice to the most vulnerable. Special phone contacts were set up to answer the increased number of calls at the Consulates, and extended opening hours were planned to promptly react to any need of Italian nationals in the UK.

The Embassy of Italy in London, in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and with the national carrier Alitalia, guaranteed daily flights connecting London Heathrow to Rome Fiumicino, overcoming the travel limitations throughout the most critical phase of the pandemic. However, those flights were not organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and operated under usual commercial conditions.

**Box 12. Difficulties in accessing consular services - insights from respondents**

'It is impossible to leave the UK due to the impossibility of registering a newborn at the registry office and consequently being able to apply for the baby's passport.' **[Respondent # 82, female, 35-44 years]**

'The consular service in London is very bad. All the offices have closed, nothing can be renewed, not even online. Nobody answers the phone calls. Trying to contact someone to renew the Italian passport is a nightmare. The site is scattered. I don't live in London and it's not easy to travel to London to renew my passport.' **[Respondent # 184, female, 45-54 years]**

'They have blocked the procedures for issuing passports and I am waiting for my son to be able to go to Italy on vacations.' **[Respondent #175, female, 25-34 year]**

Due to the remarked reduction in flights from the UK to Italy, with only one direct route operating from London to Rome, several Italians explored the possibility to travel by car or train.

**Box 13. Mobility restrictions: travelling from other parts of the UK and travelling back by car**

'The only way to fly to Italy is from London. A problem for those who live in the North.' **[Respondent #129, female, 35-44 years]**

'Initially, I was considering returning to Italy but it was impossible for AIRE members. It is too risky as it was compulsory to cross the whole country to leave from London.' **[Respondent #173, female, 35-44 years]**

'I left with my family on 16 March and we returned to Italy by car via France. I live here with my husband and children and we feared not being able to go back to Italy. Flights were already blocked. One of our colleagues who lives in France told us that France was going to close their borders so we decided to quickly pack a few items and return to Italy. Then we found out that France never closed the borders and some flights were available, but at that moment, with the information available, the situation looked very uncertain and that was the best decision.' **[Respondent #208, female, 35-44 years]**

International mobility started to return to normality in June, when the Italian government lifted self-isolation and restrictions to travel to and from other EU countries, Schengen countries, UK, and European minor territories.<sup>19</sup> Many of our respondents travelled back then.

**Box 14. Return to Italy after the lockdown– Insights from interviews**

'I waited to go back to Italy since the Government advice was to stay home and it was extremely complicated to go back home. I will go to Italy and spend my holidays in Italy.' **[Riccardo, 28, financial broker, 3 years in the UK]**

'It was very hard not to be able to come back to Italy and see my parents. Though, unlike many other people I know, I decided to stay in the UK as I was afraid I would have not coped with the strictness of the Italian lockdown. I went back to Italy in June

<sup>19</sup> §6, Decree of the Prime Minister on 17th May 2020  
[https://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/doc/2020/06/dpcm\\_20200611-txt.pdf](https://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/doc/2020/06/dpcm_20200611-txt.pdf)



when the lockdown was relaxed and stayed there for a month and a half.' [Lara, 30, stewardess, 5 years in the UK]

## 6.2 The impact of pandemic restrictions on citizenship rights and freedom of movement

As European citizens, Italians living in the UK benefit from a policy framework that, at least in principles, guarantees that they are entitled to freedom of movement within the EU and access to health care and pension transfer. In practice, however, many people face constraints to the full enjoyment of these rights due to gaps in Italian, British and European legislation. Brexit and Covid-19 have magnified these gaps and enlarged the pool of people that are experiencing restrictions to their rights.

For example, Italians living abroad and registered on the AIRE experience difficulties in accessing health assistance when they return to Italy for visits or tourism. In principle, those registered in the AIRE can still access health assistance using the European Health Insurance Card (EHIC) from their country of residence<sup>20</sup>, but only for emergencies and generally for a maximum of 90 days per year. In addition, due to the decentralised regional-based Italian health system, an Italian resident abroad may not be able to access full health coverage, if their AIRE registration municipality (in most cases, the last municipality where a person lived before moving abroad) is in a different region than the one where a person spends their time in Italy (i.e. at family's or relative's address).

Fear of losing access to the Italian public health system is a major reason for people not registering on the AIRE records, as many prefer being treated by Italian doctors. During the pandemic, it emerged as a critical issue, as Italian residents abroad who temporarily returned to Italy had no guarantees of health assistance.

After Brexit, European citizens will maintain some health coverage across the EU thanks to the provision under the European Health Insurance Card, but all European citizens (including Italians) moving to the UK after the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2021 - therefore without Settled or Pre-Settled Status - will not have free health coverage and will have to pay an annual fee to access the NHS.

### Box 15. Preference for Italian health assistance – interviews

'I had a stressful experience because I had an allergy and this made people suspicious as they thought I had COVID-19. Also, I had a throat infection and the NHS was not able to help me. GPs only gave me painkillers, while private clinics did not allow their specialists to visit patients. So, the infection got worse and I had to go back to Italy to get proper treatment.' [Clarissa, 31, veterinary nurse, 4 years in the UK]

### Box 16. Preference for Italian health assistance - insights from respondents

'I have even less trust in the NHS and I would love to see my doctor in Italy in the future but because I have signed up to AIRE that will not be possible for me.' [Respondent #121, female, 25-34 years]

'Living in this country makes me feel unsafe because the quality of health care is very poor.' [Respondent #144, female, 25-34 years]

<sup>20</sup> Health care for UK nationals visiting the EU, UK Government, 28 January 2019  
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/uk-residents-visiting-the-eueea-and-switzerland-healthcare>

Another frequent problem are the restrictions to travels between the UK and Italy (or any Schengen area country) together with non-EU family members. Immigration rules under the Schengen Treaty allow the issuance of a visa for non-EU family members of EU nationals under privileged conditions, namely if the residence card bears a specific wording and if travelling together with the EU citizen. Nevertheless, due to the pandemic, applications for visas have not been possible, or with very restrictive limitations, as the Schengen area closed its borders. This has made it difficult for some families to plan on short notice any kind of travel between countries.

Currently, European citizens are entitled to an 'initial right of residence' for three months when they enter the United Kingdom. Full 'right to reside' is granted to European citizens who belong to one of the following categories: employed, self-employed, registered as job-seeker, self-sufficient, student. People who do not belong to one of these categories do not have the right to reside and therefore do not qualify for benefits. In order to apply for benefits, one has to demonstrate to have the right to reside through the 'habitual residence test'. Such a test is demanding in terms of information required, especially for people who have precarious jobs, informal employment, or no income of their own. It means that those who need benefits the most are more likely to fail the test.

#### **Box 17. Italians seeking advice and assistance on their rights – the case of INCA CGIL**

Italians in the UK can get help through the local offices of Italian trade unions, such as INCA CGIL, among others, to access social security, health and well-being on the workplace, citizenship and AIRE registration.

We interviewed the coordinator of INCA CGIL in London, Maurizio Rodorigo, about the main challenges faced by people asking for their assistance, and how they have changed in light of Brexit and Covid-19.

*"Even before the Brexit referendum, we used to receive many requests of help to access benefits, for example benefits from the Universal Credit System.*

*To access benefits, you must pass the Habitual Residence Test and demonstrate that you have the right to reside. But many people, even those who have been here for years, fail the test, often because they are unable to demonstrate that they have been working in the country. Even before Brexit, freedom of movement within the European Union truly existed only for workers and not as a universal right.*

*People with recognised disabilities in Italy often have not seen their disability recognised here, because criteria are not harmonised. You have to know the system to understand the questions and how to respond. For example, you must be able to demonstrate that you have been actively searching for a job.*

*When the Covid-19 pandemic exploded, but the UK was not yet in lockdown, we were contacted by Italians who were very concerned about the lack of protective and preventive measures on the workplace. Many asked information on their Statutory Sick Pay Right and how to address related issues with their employers. Very few people are members of a trade union and have any form of safeguard when something happens.*

*Many contacted us to regularise their situation with the Italian government and were not aware of the necessity to apply for the Settled Status and to register with AIRE.*

*When the lockdown started and the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and Self-Employment Income Support Scheme were announced, we received many requests of*

information on how to access them. Many others asked for help to access the Universal Credit Scheme, or even just on how to pay the rent after having lost their job. We also received requests from people generally concerned about losing their job, scared of the health emergency and unable to access consular services and return to Italy.

Some people ask information on what support measures are available when returning to Italy, and others are already thinking about how and when to come back to the UK after the crisis. The fact that many public offices have closed, including the Consulate, has meant that many administrative requests (for instance recording newborns or renewing a passport) have been greatly delayed."

#### Box 18. Limits accessing benefits and work rights - insights from respondents

'Unfortunately, following the pandemic, I have lost my job and I have started to look straight away but I couldn't find anything. I have tried to apply for universal credit, but that was denied.' **[Respondent #73, female, 25-34 years]**

'I am a nurse, I am diabetic and I am also taking antihypertensive therapy. Other (non-British) nurses have similar conditions, they should have been considered "Vulnerable People" and should have stayed at home for 12 weeks paid for by the government. My British colleagues take half of the antihypertensive therapy I take, and they could be at home since March. This made me sick.' **[Respondent #202, female, 45-54 years]**

### 6.3 The appearance of a new migration flow and impact on international mobility plans

One of the most striking effects of the pandemic on Italians abroad has been the emergence of a new migration flow of Italians returning to their homeland. The Consulate estimates that, from the beginning of the pandemic to the end of April, approximately 30,000 Italians (nearly 10% of the total population on the AIRE records) travelled back to Italy. For comparison, last available figures show that in 2019 approximately 4,500 Italians left the UK, either to go back to Italy or to move to a different country.

According to provisional Eurostat data, in the first three quarters of 2020, more than 8,000 Italians relocated from the UK to Italy, and an additional 2,500 relocated to another country different to Italy.<sup>21</sup> These figures are approximately double the number of Italians who moved back to Italy in 2019 from the UK and nearly ten times those who moved to another country.<sup>22</sup>

#### Box 19. Return permanently to Italy during the lockdown - interviews

'I was already looking for a job in Italy and I've got the job offer around April during the period of the lockdown. I followed [the development of the health crisis] quite apprehensively because I had no idea when I would be able to return to Italy and then I received the job offer. London-Rome flights have always been active and I had a valid reason [a new job] to go back to Italy. I spent the lockdown in London in March and April and the 1st of May I went back to Italy.' **[Linda, 31, project manager at a non-profit organisation, 2.5 years in the UK]**

<sup>21</sup> Own elaboration based on Eurostat data, [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Population\\_and\\_population\\_change\\_statistics](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Population_and_population_change_statistics)

<sup>22</sup> La presenza italiana in Inghilterra e Galles: studio statistico del Consolato Generale d'Italia a Londra, October 2020 [https://conslondra.esteri.it/consolato\\_londra/it/la\\_comunicazione/dal\\_consolato/2020/10/studio-statistico-edito-dal-consolato.html](https://conslondra.esteri.it/consolato_londra/it/la_comunicazione/dal_consolato/2020/10/studio-statistico-edito-dal-consolato.html) (last retrieved on 06/12/2020)

This is consistent with the findings of our survey, which showed that 9% of our respondents went back to Italy because of the Covid-19 crisis. This is, to the best of our knowledge, the first direct estimate of the numbers of Italians who travelled back from the UK during the lockdown in the first wave of the pandemic. It confirms that a considerable number of Italians living in the UK left the country because of Covid-19, and that this occurred despite the restrictions to international travels that have been in place since March.

Our evidence from the survey and the interviews also sheds some lights on the reasons why people went back to Italy. We identified two categories of people who were more likely to do so: i) people whose jobs allowed them to work remotely; ii) people with either caring responsibilities for relatives, such as older parents still living in Italy, or in relationships with partners still living in Italy.

#### Box 20. Reasons why people went back to Italy - insights from respondents

'I left the UK because I don't want to live in a country that doesn't care about its citizens' health. Also, London has become too expensive and unliveable.' **[Respondent #5, female, 25-34 years]**

'I can now work from home in Italy if I want ' **[Respondent #209, female, 25-34 years]**

'The fact that working from home could become a constant makes living in a shared flat very difficult. This is the motivation that pushes me to return to Italy lately.' **[Respondent #19, female, 25-34 years]**

The majority of returning nationals that we identified (corresponding to the 7% of our sample) said that they went back to Italy only temporarily, planning to go back to the UK as soon as the circumstances would allow.

This begs the question of how this trend will evolve in the coming months. Our survey and interviews also start to shed some light on how the pandemic is having an influence on medium- and long-term plans in terms of international mobility.

Among the respondents who in our survey said they did not go back to Italy because of the Covid-19 crisis (90% of our sample), a majority said they were planning to continue living in the UK in the foreseeable future (56% of that 90%). Smaller shares said they were planning to go back to Italy only for a short period in the next months (14%); that they were contemplating the possibility to permanently go back to Italy whenever possible (7%); that they intended to permanently go back to Italy but they were currently unable to do so (4%); or that they were planning to move to another country (3%).

#### Box 21. Returning to Italy permanently in the future – insights from respondents

'I will certainly return to Italy and the pandemic makes me think about it more often and more seriously.' **[Respondent #81, female, 45-54 years]**

'I have a great desire to return to live in Italy permanently, and due to the pandemic, I have greatly re-evaluated Italy. But I haven't been there for a long time and the working and cultural conditions (in particular: the condition of women and immigrants) were so bad that they made me migrate and that I still bear the trauma. I would not have the strength to face them again.' **[Respondent #17, female, 35-44 years]**

'I am thinking of returning to Italy even if only for long holidays or permanently but it is still not clear what to do when returning to the UK (isolation or not).' **[Respondent #145, female, 35-44 years]**

Overall, our survey results suggest that many Italians living in the UK may be changing their life plans following the Covid-19 pandemic. When asked whether the pandemic made them reconsider their intention to continue living in the UK, less than half of our respondents (48%) said they would still prefer to live in the UK. More than one in 10 respondents (12%) said that the pandemic persuaded them to leave the UK, while they did not intend to do so before Covid-19. Some other participants said that the pandemic made them prefer going back to Italy (5%) or moving to another country (2%).

## Box 22. Plans to leave the UK permanently– insights from respondents

'The pandemic has highlighted many shortcomings on the part of the British Government. I don't know if I was the only one to "idealize" the UK but I changed my mind a lot especially after this situation. I already had in mind to return to Italy and now I would like to do it even earlier. Although unfortunately, the Italian economic situation will now have worsened again.' **[Respondent #91, female, 25-34 years]**

'Brexit had already played a significant role in my family's decision to leave the UK. With the pandemic and the management of the health situation, we have simply reconsidered the matter with greater urgency. We will return to the UK to prepare for our definitive departure. For now, our family has left the country to be able to live the summer peacefully with a small child out of the uncertainty of the UK.' **[Respondent #125, female, 45-54 years]**

'The management of the pandemic has added weight to the already existing negative baggage due to Brexit. The relationship between the positives and negatives of living in London is changing in favour of moving to other European countries or returning to Italy.' **[Respondent #99, male, 25-34 years]**

An interesting insight that has emerged in the open questions and the interviews is that in many cases the desire to leave the UK was motivated by the dissatisfaction with the way the UK government had managed the health emergency. Further research is needed to investigate whether this pattern will persist in the medium term, and how it will be compounded by Brexit.

## Box 23. Brexit, the pandemic management and future in the UK - interviews

'I am worried from an economic point of view, i.e. the possibility of a no-deal Brexit paired with an economic crisis because of the pandemic. Prices and taxes will likely increase. I think that I am going to stay in the UK for good because this is still a good place to find work. Despite these concerns, I feel safe in the UK.' **[Maria Luisa, 32, Senior Account Manager for a marketing company, 6 years in the UK]**

'I'm seriously worried about the COVID-19/Brexit combined effect on the country's economy and I'm ready to leave in case things turn out to be very bad.' **[Andrea, 35, freelance consultant and researcher, 7 years in the UK]**

'Despite the UK government's inadequate behaviour during the pandemic, I think I will stay here in the short-term. In general, I still believe the UK can and will offer better job

opportunities compared to Italy, where higher taxes and lower meritocracy do not allow for professional development.' **[Anonymous, 33, lab technician, 5 years in the UK]**

#### Box 24. Brexit, the pandemic management and future in the UK – insights from respondents

'Unfortunately, the pandemic caused a sense of uncertainty that far exceeded the sentiment I had in the context of Brexit. I'm seriously considering where to live now. It is a sad situation not to be able to think about returning to Italy (I work in cultural heritage and unfortunately Italy does not offer me a job like my current job in the UK) and the UK has become an increasingly difficult place for foreigners, so we immigrants will continue to move in the hope of improving our lives and living in a society that cares for people.' **[Respondent #24, female, 35-44 years]**.

'The British Government has handled the emergency inadequately and irresponsibly. This, coupled with Brexit, made me think that maybe it's time to leave the UK as soon as possible.' **[Respondent #28, female, 35-44 years]**.

'Brexit has a stronger influence on staying in the UK than the pandemic.' **[Respondent #103, female, 35-44 years]**.

## 7. The impact of Covid-19 on employment and economic conditions of Italians in the UK

The economic impact of Covid-19 on the economic conditions of Italians in the UK appears to have been significant, but highly differentiated between people with permanent employment and well-integrated in the country, and those with temporary contracts and working in the service and hospitality sectors.

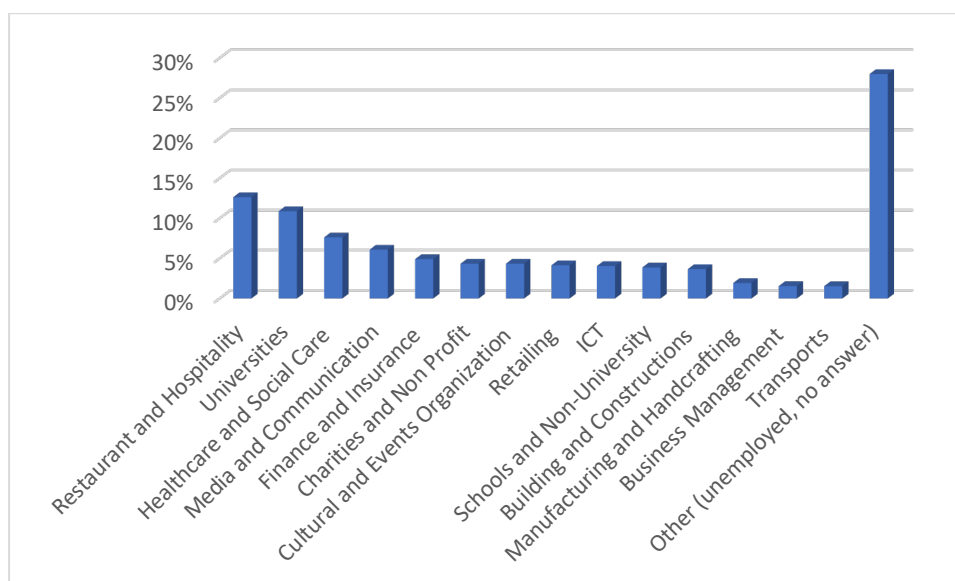
The vast majority of respondents in our sample were working in February 2020, and were concentrated in a few occupational sectors, such as restaurants, hotels, hospitality, and touristic services (13% of the sample); academia (10%); and healthcare and social care services (8%) (see Figure 7).

For comparison, according to figures of the Italian Consulate in London<sup>23</sup>, the distribution of Italians enrolled on the AIRE records across different sectors in April 2020 was as follows: restaurants, hotels, hospitality and touristic services (13%), building and construction, and manufacturing (12%), business management (3.8%), health care services (3.6%), retailing (2.7%), education (2.5%), with further 22% of the Italians working generally as 'office workers', and 5% as 'professionals'.

<sup>23</sup> La presenza italiana in Inghilterra e Galles: studio statistico del Consolato Generale d'Italia a Londra, October 2020 [https://cons Londra.esteri.it/consolato\\_londra/it/la\\_comunicazione/dal\\_consolato/2020/10/studio-statistico-edito-dal-consolato.html](https://cons Londra.esteri.it/consolato_londra/it/la_comunicazione/dal_consolato/2020/10/studio-statistico-edito-dal-consolato.html) (last retrieved on 06/12/2020)



**Figure 7: Survey's respondents classified by job sector of employment**



Note: Own elaboration based on the survey's answers

In terms of job status, about two-thirds (65%) of our respondents report being employees with permanent contracts, 10.69% self-employed, 10% employees with temporary contracts, 4% full-time students, 4% in search of a job, and 1% homemakers.

Out of 1,038 respondents, 357 (34%) declared that their employment situation changed as a result of the pandemics, 666 said that the situation did not change (64%) and 15 (1%) preferred not to answer.

#### **Box 25. Change of employment - insights from respondents**

'I continued to work and with much longer hours and without breaks, but I found a human side in my company that I didn't think I could even consider.' **[Respondent #42, female, 35-44 years]**

'I didn't expect to be abandoned like this, after years of paying taxes! I didn't expect to be fired like this!' **[Respondent #166, male, 25-34 years]**

#### **Box 26. Change of employment – insights from interviews**

'At the end of May, with no warning, I was made redundant with two weeks' notice; they said that they were trying to find me another role, but that didn't work out.' **[Maria Luisa, 32, Senior Account Manager for a marketing company, 6 years in the UK]**

'The pandemic had a big impact on my job situation as I was made redundant. I had a bad feeling since March when I started seeing flights pretty much empty. In May the company announced 3,000 people would be made redundant.' **[Lara, 30, stewardess, 5 years in the UK]**

Respondents were also asked to indicate how their economic situation had changed, compared to before the Covid-19 outbreak. Out of 1,033 responses to this question, 386

(37%) declared that their economic situation had worsened, while 76 (7%) said it got a lot worse. Surprisingly, 111 people (11% of the respondents) said that their situation got better.

**Box 27. Worsening of the economic conditions due to the pandemic -insights from respondents**

'The pandemic did not affect my work but my wife lost her job and this greatly influenced our life from an economic point of view. Because of Covid-19, we decided not to share a house with other people, taking on all the rent for two months.'  
[Respondent #115, female, 45-54 years]

'I had to continue paying the rent despite having no income.'  
[Respondent #56, female, 18-24 years]

'My salary was cut by 20%.'  
[Respondent #107, female, 35-44 years]

**Box 28. Worsening of the economic conditions due to the pandemic -insights from interviews**

'Before the pandemic, I taught Italian face-to-face to earn extra cash, in addition to my low-paid pension. Now I keep doing that on Whatsapp, but it's more difficult.'  
[Marisa, 70, retired, 42 years in the UK]

In general, those working in sectors most impacted by the crisis - i.e. in the construction, hospitality, and manufacturing sectors - are more likely to declare that their financial conditions deteriorated and that they asked for assistance, compared to those working in other sectors.

The survey highlights that 51% of those who answered (532 out of 1,027 valid responses) received some form of financial help. The vast majority of them (78%) accessed schemes offered by the British or Italian governments. The most frequently cited types of help are the ones provided by the former, such as the Universal Credit or the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. The remaining, 22%, got financial help from either banks or friends and relatives.

**Box 29. The economic policy response of the UK government to the Covid-19**

The pandemic is having a severe economic impact in the UK. Gross domestic product fell by 20.4% in the three months following the lockdown that ended in June, the biggest decline of any major economy. By the end of August, 730,000 jobs had been lost and companies had announced tens of thousands of redundancies.<sup>24</sup> Aviation, retail, hospitality and leisure are among the hardest-hit sectors.<sup>25</sup>

At the end of March, the government announced economic measures meant to support workers and businesses. In particular, under the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (also called furlough scheme), the government pays 80% of employees' salary for hours not worked. The scheme, initially meant to last three months, has been extended until March 2021, with 9.6 million workers having been put on furlough.

<sup>24</sup> 730,000 workers fall from UK payrolls between March and July, The Guardian, 11/08/2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/aug/11/coronavirus-730000-workers-fall-from-uk-payrolls-between-march-and-july>

<sup>25</sup> UK coronavirus job losses: the latest data on redundancies and furloughs, The Guardian, 19/11/2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/31/uk-coronavirus-job-losses-the-latest-data-on-redundancies-and-furloughs>

While the scheme has admittedly prevented economic hardship for many, there is a real risk that furloughed jobs will turn into permanent redundancies as the scheme comes to an end. There has also been a lively discussion on the actual generosity of the scheme as compared to the schemes implemented by other European countries.<sup>26</sup>

Measures have also been adopted to provide support to businesses, including loans and credit guarantees, tax relief and cash grants. In the context of Brexit, there has been a special emphasis on supporting small and medium businesses, but the actual impact of these measures will only be clear in the coming months.

### Box 30. Furlough scheme - interviews

'At first, when I was put on a furlough scheme, I felt scared as I have never considered the Italian equivalent as a positive thing. However, my company reassured me, sharing their serious solid plans for the future.' **[Anonymous, 33, lab technician, 5 years in the UK]**

'I was furloughed, and I have been lucky. I work as a freelance and during that period I was under a contract. Without that contract, I wouldn't have had help. In the film industry 1 out of 4 people has not received any help.' **[Sofia, 33, freelance production coordinator in the film industry, 9 years in the UK]**

### Box 31. Government support - insights from respondents

'Despite all the problems, I have to recognise that thanks to universal credits I have been able to continue paying rent and to go shopping without problems. I felt protected.' **[Respondent #12, female, 35-44 years]**

'I think that the UK government has given a concrete and immediate financial response, for example I was furloughed at 80% of my already decent salary at the beginning of the lockdown, and I can live without facing major issues.' **[Respondent #136, female, 45-54 years].**

Overall, respondents were satisfied with the level of assistance that they received, with 54% judging it good or very good (a score of 4 or 5 out of 5), compared to 23% of respondents who found it poor or very poor (scoring 1 or 2 out of 5). Statistical analysis suggests that the level of satisfaction does not seem to be influenced by any of the individual characteristics analysed in section 4. The only exception is having a postgraduate degree, which is negatively associated with the satisfaction for employment/income assistance.

This positive assessment of the economic assistance measures provided by the UK government, especially the furlough scheme, is also reflected in many of the comments expressed in our interviews and open questions.

<sup>26</sup> It's almost impossible to say which country has the most generous furlough scheme, Channel 4 Fact Check, 3 September 2020 <https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/factcheck-its-almost-impossible-to-say-which-country-has-the-most-generous-furlough-scheme>

**Box 32. Positive impact of economic assistance - insights from respondents**

'In Italy, we would not have been so lucky on an economic level, our employers here are treating us very well, keeping us informed and will help us with the new rules for returning to work when we are required.' **[Respondent # 123, female, 35-44 years]**

'I will always be grateful to the British government with regards to the management of the pandemic emergency because it allowed me to save my business. I work in the real estate sector, had I been in Italy in a similar situation, I would have lost my business and left 10 people unemployed. Here I was given the freedom to leave the house and continue to work even under lockdown.' **[Respondent # 158, male, 25-34 years]**

Overall, our evidence suggests that Covid-19 has had a severe economic impact of Italians in the UK, but that the economic measures implemented by the government managed to protect many of them from deep and prolonged consequences. However, these measures were not designed to reach those on precarious employment and vulnerable situations. As discussed, our sample is unlikely to be representative of the most vulnerable categories of Italians in the UK; therefore, the figures in our report are likely to underestimate the negative economic impact on the Italian community in the UK at large.

**7.1 Covid-19 emergency Italian legislation and its relevance for the Italian community in the UK (or lack thereof)**

Since the start of the pandemic, the Italian government has adopted a number of income support measures, some of which also targeting Italians living abroad.

The first legislative measures introduced to respond to the pandemic in March 2020 (collectively known as "Cura Italia")<sup>27</sup> included funds for one million Euros for protection and safety, and four million Euros for income support or loans for Italians abroad, including those occasionally present abroad.

The second group of legislative measures (adopted in May and known as "Rilancio") established that Italians registered on the AIRE record were eligible to apply for "Emergency income" (Reddito di Emergenza – REM) provided they permanently returned to Italy by the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2020 and could prove to have lost most of their income due to the pandemic.

**Box 33. Legislation gap on financial support – insights from survey respondents**

Since I had just moved to London and was looking for a job, basically I wasn't entitled to receive any financial support neither from Italy nor from England. I was left on my own. Only my family helped me out. **[Respondent #83, female, 35-44 years]**

Finally, the Italian National Social Insurance Institute (INPS), which is in charge of the payment of the Italian pensions, temporarily suspended the verification of proof of life related to years 2019-2020 to protect the health and the economic interests of Italian pensioners abroad. Moreover, when resuming this process in Autumn 2020, the Italian Consulates in London and in Edinburgh adopted an alternative procedure that allows the verification to take place through a video call, instead of an in-person visit.

<sup>27</sup> §72, sub 4-bis to 4-quarter Decree of the Prime Minister on 17<sup>th</sup> March 2020  
<https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2020/04/29/20G00045/sg>

## 8. Trust in government and the media

With our research, we also sought to gather evidence on the extent to which Italians relied on Italian and British media to stay informed during the pandemic, and how their trust towards the British Government evolved. To this end, we included questions on these issues in the survey and we raised them in the interviews.

The survey showed that on a scale from 1 (little) to 5 (a lot), respondents relied slightly more on Italian media (3.2 on average) compared to British media (3 on average) to stay informed about Covid-19. Italians who have lived longer in the UK show a higher level of reliance on British media compared to relative newcomers.

Answering the open question, the few respondents who directly commented on media communication tended to assess the quality of the information received from British media as 'shallow', 'superficial', 'incomplete' or 'imprecise,' leading some to question the 'veracity of the news' diffused by governmental sources. As a consequence, these respondents said to have felt a sense of 'confusion,' 'perplexity' and 'bewilderment'.

### Box 34. Trust in the media in Italy and the UK - interviews

'At first, I was checking the news about the UK situation but then it became too stressful and I gave up.' **[Anna, 41, occupational therapist assistant, 15 years in the UK]**

'I followed mainly the Italian media and then the Guardian and the BBC to see a little bit of the difference and to compare the coverage of the pandemic.' **[Linda, 31, project manager at a non-profit organisation; 2.5 years in the UK]**

'I follow the Italian media more, it's a habit, but I also think that the information coming from the UK was too conflicting and not clear.' **[Riccardo, 28, financial broker, 3 years in the UK]**

### Box 35. Trust in the media in Italy and the UK – insights from respondents

'The untruthfulness of the news spread by the media was shameful.' **[Respondent # 146, male, 45-54 years]**

'The British [media] were superficial and could not communicate the gravity of the situation.' **[Respondent # 139, female, 55-64 years]**

'A country with an incapable government and a complacent media system is not ready to face times of crisis.' **[Respondent # 152, male, 35-44 years]**

Many respondents commented on the UK government's response to the Covid-19 crisis. The vast majority displayed a sharp criticism of the government's actions: many comments remarked on the delay in the response to the health crisis and the underestimation of the impact of Covid-19 in the country. This overall negative assessment of the government's actions was reflected in an emotive response expressed as a high or growing sense of 'distrust,' accompanied by a feeling of 'abandonment.' However, the financial response of the government, with measures such as the furlough scheme, the job retention scheme, and various forms of support for self-employed and for businesses were praised by few

respondents. A limited number of respondents expressed an overall 'satisfaction' for the measures put in place.

### Box 36. Trust in the UK Government - interviews

'I would have expected the opposite: i.e. that Italy makes a mess whereas the UK perfectly deals with it [pandemic management]. Instead, it was the opposite.' **[Giulia, 21, student and part-time worker, 6 years in the UK]**

'The pandemic situation was handled very badly from the beginning. The UK government focused on economic interests rather than on people's lives. There was lack of clarity in the measures they implemented, plus the government was not efficient in enforcing the rules.' **[Anna, 41, occupational therapist assistant, 15 years in the UK]**

'Although they have never explicitly said it, the government has done everything to save the economy at the expense of people's lives.' **[Giuseppe, 34, senior scientist, 2 years in the UK]**

### Box 37. Trust in the UK Government - insights from respondents

'The pandemic in the UK has been, and continues to be, very badly managed. Many people have died and many others lost their jobs. The lockdown has been imposed late, and businesses and schools are reopening too fast. There was no control to enforce the lockdown and people were left free.' **[Respondent # 30, male, 25-34 years]**

'I began to understand that the United Kingdom has very serious problems from a political and healthcare point of view, and that we Italians should first begin to realize that our country is not the worst as they want us to believe.' **[Respondent # 62, female, 25-34 years]**

'I was determined to take English citizenship, but now, in light of how this health emergency was handled, I am very disappointed and I don't know if I will go through with it, also for a matter of principle. I didn't feel safe and protected.' **[Respondent # 25, female, 35-44 years]**

When respondents made remarks on health measures and the NHS plan, most of their appraisals included criticisms of the 'bad management' of the crisis, basing their judgment on the 'high death toll,' but also on the considerable 'delay' in the response to it. As a result, a vast majority of comments on the health status presented feelings of 'worry,' 'unsafety,' 'danger,' 'fear of becoming sick,' with some expressing 'perplexity' as to how the health system functioned. Nonetheless, a single respondent declared to have felt protected as an extremely vulnerable person.

### Box 38. Trust in the healthcare system, insights from interviews

'I thought the NHS was not good even before pandemic kicked in. Then the virus and the UK government's incapacity in controlling it made the health system collapse entirely.' **[Clarissa, 31, veterinary nurse, 4 years in the UK]**



**Box 39. Trust in the healthcare system – insights from respondents**

'Healthcare for Covid was inadequate already at the start of the lockdown, which took place two weeks late. Only in April, the government invested more in Covid-19 tests.'

**[Respondent # 36, female, 45-54 years]**

'The British government proves they are NOT able to organize and help the country in terms of health, by not forcing people to follow measures that could have improved the situation and controlled it from the beginning.'

**[Respondent # 60, female, 35-34 years]**

To summarise, based on the responses given to the open question of the survey, Italians in the UK expressed disappointment for the overall governmental management of the crisis, from the point of view of both communication and health policy measures put in place. However, appreciation has been shown for the economic measures adopted to support businesses and workers.

## **9. Fault lines: inadequate responses to Italian emigration and European internal migration**

The experience of Italians living in the UK during the Covid-19 emergency sheds light on the key issues that may have impacted Italians, and other Europeans, living abroad during the pandemic. In particular, the combination of Brexit and Covid-19 is highlighting the 'fault lines' in the European internal migration, including the gaps in policy and political responses to this increasingly relevant phenomenon. These gaps exist at the level of the European policy framework, as well as in Italian and British policies.

In this section, we identify and discuss the major gaps that have emerged from our research and start to outline recommendations on how to address them.

### **9.1 Gaps in existing policies**

The evidence gathered from the survey and the in-depth interviews suggests that there has not been adequate support to Italians abroad during the pandemic and that this is largely due to pre-existing inadequate policies.

- 1) First, despite some recent improvements, there is clear evidence of insufficient and inadequate support to Italian residents in the UK, including a lack of resources assigned to consulates and organisations supporting Italians abroad. Demands on citizens' rights organisations (e.g. *patronati*) were increasing even before the Covid-19 pandemic exploded, as a result of the upcoming changes to the UK immigration system post-Brexit. These organisations rely heavily on volunteer staff and struggled to meet all demands, while consular services were experiencing similar delays. Consular offices, COMITES and citizens' rights organisations will continue to face an increase in requests of help to navigate employment, pension, tax and immigration systems in the coming years, as Brexit and the impact of Covid-19 continue to unfold.

- 2) Second, there are currently loopholes in the Italian and the UK welfare systems, which mean that many Italians living in the UK do not have access to any form of social assistance, such as unemployment and child benefits. The furlough scheme implemented by the UK government has prevented millions of workers, including Italians, from losing their job and income. However, it is only available to people on regular employment, while many Italians in the UK are on temporary or zero-hours contracts, do not have a national insurance number, or do not qualify for the scheme. Lack of a national insurance number also prevents some Italians in the UK from applying to any type of welfare scheme such as universal credits.

On the other side, the 'reddito di emergenza' (REM, emergency income) provided by the Italian government is only available to Italian residents or to Italians who have permanently returned to Italy before June 2020. During the Covid-19 crisis, this is creating a situation in which many people do not have access to any form of income assistance, neither from the Italian nor from the British government.

- 3) A third emerging gap relates to the awareness of the importance of being registered on the AIRE records. The Italian government has already implemented information campaigns<sup>28</sup> to explain the benefits of being registered on the AIRE records, but with limited success. Benefits of being on the AIRE records include the possibility to apply for identity and travel documents abroad and being able to vote for national general elections and national referenda without returning to Italy. Lack of understanding by many Italian citizens of what being registered on the AIRE means and what rights and entitlements come with it prevents many people from enjoying these rights. For example, one of the functions of the Italian consulates is to provide an income support mechanism to people in urgent monetary needs, but this is only available to Italian citizens on the AIRE records. On the other side, many people do not join the AIRE because of the lengthy and bureaucratic process.
- 4) A fourth emerging gap relates to the healthcare coverage of Italians residents abroad and registered on the AIRE records who need to temporarily go back to Italy for health or family reasons. Under the European Health Insurance Card (EHIC), they are entitled to 90 days of health assistance for emergency reasons while in Italy, but this may prove insufficient for those who returned during the first wave of the pandemic and have remained over the second wave. In addition, provisions for UK residents (including Italian residents in the UK) under the EHIC will only be valid until 31st December 2020 (end of Brexit transition period). The NHS announced that EU nationals living in the UK will be able to apply for a new UK EHIC in due course, but no further details have been provided yet. This uncertainty is especially concerning under the current circumstances. For example, the Covid-19 vaccines will be distributed according to different rules and criteria in different European countries, making it easier for people 'between health systems' to be left out from distribution plans.
- 5) Another emerging gap relates to the interaction of the pandemic with the requirements to apply for Settled Status. During the pandemic, many Italians returned to Italy. Those who stayed outside of the UK for longer than 6 months will lose all the accumulated residency time and will need to restart from zero. They will be allowed back in the UK but unless they reapply for Pre-Settled status before the 30<sup>th</sup> June 2021,

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<sup>28</sup> *Anagrafe Italiani Residenti all'Estero: 6 buoni motivi per iscriverli*, Ministero degli Affari Esteri  
[https://www.esteri.it/mae/it/servizi/italiani-all-estero/aire\\_0.html](https://www.esteri.it/mae/it/servizi/italiani-all-estero/aire_0.html)

they will not reach the threshold of five years of qualifying time before their Pre-Settled Status expires. This is a problem concerning all European communities in the UK and one that the UK government should address urgently.

- 6) A final, systemic gap is the lack of a proper and adequate European safety net. There is currently no integration of healthcare, social care, or welfare rights for European citizens who live abroad or who have worked in different European countries. It is usually vulnerable and excluded people who typically fall in the gaps of the net, despite being those in greater need of assistance.

## 9.2 Policy recommendations

While an in-depth discussion of the policy responses needed to fill the gaps outlined above is beyond the scope of this report and is left for future work, some preliminary recommendations and suggestions can be identified. Some of these suggestions concern the Italian Government, others the British Government, and others the European institutions, which demonstrates how complex the issues are and how pressing the need for a multilateral response to tackle them is.

### Recommendations for the Italian government:

- Strengthen the network and coordination of organisations (citizens organisations, *patronati*) assisting Italian residents abroad. In light of the likely growing demands for assistance, it is also critical to endow them with enhanced capacity and funding, primarily with resources from the Italian Government, but potentially also from the British Government and EU institutions.
- Reform the system of social security so that it includes forms of income assistance accessible by Italians living abroad who are not eligible for other forms of support from the country where they live.
- Roll out a systematic communication and awareness campaign on the rights and duties of the Italians residents abroad, effectively explaining the importance of being registered on the AIRE records. In addition, the AIRE registration system should be simplified and digitalised, as already happening in some Consulates.
- Increase the capacity of consular services in the UK in the three years following the start of Brexit to ensure appropriate support for Italians living in the country, for example speeding up the issuance of passports, providing regular and accessible online assistance and reducing the response time for online queries.
- Exceptionally extend the healthcare coverage provided through the *Sistema Sanitario Nazionale* (SSN, the Italian National Health System) to all Italians on the AIRE records who will need to return to Italy during the pandemic. Through an enhanced and streamlined online system, these Italians registered on the AIRE records should be given the option to indicate a temporary contact address when back in Italy (not necessarily within the same municipality where they are registered on the AIRE records, being this potentially different from the one where they have family). The corresponding Region should then grant access to the regional healthcare service to these citizens living abroad but temporarily going back to Italy.
- Set up a monitoring system to ensure that all Italians living abroad have access to the Covid-19 vaccines and are provided with the information and the economic means and opportunity to vaccinate.

**Recommendations for the UK government:**

- Launch an information campaign targeted to vulnerable groups of EU citizens, particularly among young precarious workers and elder communities who spent most of their lives in the UK to boost applications for Settled and Pre-Settled status ahead of the 30<sup>th</sup> of June deadline.
- Expand the cohort of people who can benefit from the extension to 12 months of the period that European citizens are allowed to spend outside the UK for reasons linked to Covid-19 without affecting their Settled Status application. At the moment, only students, or those directly infected by Covid-19 or subject to mandatory self-isolation and unable to travel, can benefit of the extension, but not those who temporarily left the UK for care duties or those who were able to work remotely.<sup>29</sup>
- When performing the Habitual Residence Test for an applicant who is claiming a benefit, accept a wider variety of documents for the assessment of the 'centre of interest'. For example, the list of acceptable documents could be extended to include all those already accepted for EU Settlement Scheme applications<sup>30</sup>

**Recommendations for the European Union:**

- Urgently advance the integration of European national healthcare and welfare systems, to create a fair and comprehensive European social protection system.
- In the meantime, introduce measures to fill the gaps where the existing safety nets leave European citizens who live abroad or who have worked in different European countries unprotected or uncovered.
- Enhance the role of the European Union as a hub fostering the exchange of experiences and best practices across member states, and develop direct collaboration and cooperation between regions facing similar challenges in helping migrant communities deal with the pandemic.
- Promote long-term thinking on how to address global challenges as a community of member states that prioritises multilateralism and international solidarity and strengthen collective resilience to systemic crisis.

## 10. Conclusions

Our study is arguably the first to investigate the impact of the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic - from March to June 2020 - on the Italian community in the UK by systematically gathering new evidence from a large online survey and a set of in-depth interviews.

Although our sample over-represents younger Italians who live in London, have higher levels of education and have permanent residency or Settled Status, the evidence gathered from the responses to our survey questions, the comments in the open questions,

<sup>29</sup> Coronavirus (Covid-19): EU Settlement Scheme – guidance for applicants, UK Government, 15 December 2020 <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-eu-settlement-scheme-guidance-for-applicants>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/homelessness-code-of-guidance-for-local-authorities/annex-1-the-habitual-residence-test>

and the in-depth interviews uncover some previously undocumented facts of interest to preliminarily assess the impact of Covid-19 on the Italian community in the UK.

First, the pandemic had a significant economic impact on the community of the Italians in the UK: 34% of our respondents declared that their employment situation changed as a result of the pandemic. Among these, 52% had been furloughed, whereas 15% - mainly self-employed - saw a drastic reduction of activity. Also, 37% of our respondents declared that their economic situation worsened, with 51% of respondents having received some form of financial help: 78% of these accessed programs offered by the British government, such as the Universal Credit or the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (commonly known as 'furlough scheme'), especially in the sectors most impacted by the crisis - i.e. hospitality, building, and manufacturing.

Second, one-third of our respondents believed they could have contracted Covid-19, but they were not certain about it, while 10% of our sample were certain to have had the virus (with or without test). Nonetheless, the vast majority of our respondents did not take any Covid-19 test (89%) and did not seek any medical advice (70%); of those who sought advice, 4% were not able to find any help. About half of our respondents (50%) rated the quality of the received medical advice or care either very poor or poor. At the same time, Italians on the AIRE records who have temporarily returned to Italy during the pandemic are at risk of not having access to public health assistance.

Third, while the vast majority of our respondents (90%) did not go back to Italy because of the Covid-19 crisis, a significant portion did it (9%). This is in line with some indirect estimates by the Italian Consulate in London suggesting that, from the beginning of the pandemic to end of April, approximately 30,000 Italians (nearly 10% of the total of Italians listed in the AIRE figures) went back to Italy.

Fourth, many Italians living in the UK are changing their life plans following the Covid-19 pandemic. When asked whether the pandemic made them reconsider their plans to continue living in the UK, less than half of our respondents (48%) said they would still prefer to live in the UK. More than one in 10 respondents (12%) said that the pandemic had persuaded them to leave the UK while they did not intend to do so before the pandemic. Italians who have temporarily left the UK without having already obtained the Settled Status risk losing their eligibility to get it upon their return.

Finally, multiple responses to the open questions in our survey and our in-depth interviews manifest previously undocumented anxiety and distrust for the way the UK government has dealt with the health policy response to the pandemic, and with the issues caused by the double source of uncertainty represented by the pandemic and Brexit.

While an in-depth discussion of all the possible practical implications and policy recommendations is beyond the scope of the present report and is left for future work, we have already proposed some preliminary recommendations to address the most pressing issues related to access to healthcare, social care, income support and welfare benefits, and citizenship rights.

More research and policy analysis are needed to effectively mitigate the evident anxieties of the Italian community in the UK and meet their evolving needs. If not appropriately addressed, those anxieties will likely be amplified not just by the interaction between the pandemic and Brexit, but also by the lack of a policy framework, at national or EU level, to deal with internal migration in Europe.

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# **MANIFESTO DI LONDRA**

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## **THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE ITALIAN COMMUNITY IN THE UK**

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**New evidence, insights and  
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