

BRITISH IN GREECE OVERVIEW

Group profile

We are the Greek wing of the British in Europe citizens' rights organisation. Our reach is mainly through our Facebook page, which has almost 3,000 members and is expanding at 100 new members a week. I am in contact with the admins of the other main FB groups for UK citizens in Greece and also some large local FB groups so our announcements are shared with a total readership of about 6,000.

We deal exclusively with grass roots citizens' rights issues and our aim is to help our members navigate every detail of Greek bureaucracy especially regarding Brexit. The exception is tax affairs, which we always refer to professionals. We have relevant information in our Files and Announcements sections and the wide experience and distribution of our membership means that there is always someone on hand to give specific, practical advice in any situation wherever it occurs in Greece. The Covid19 pandemic has of course been the main topic of discussion recently with many questions about our rights in the lockdown. I see this as a positive development as we are seeing a surge in new membership which will remain with us when the pandemic is over and Brexit resurfaces.

Membership profile

Our members are all British nationals scattered throughout Greece but with a concentration in certain areas like Crete (especially the west), Rhodes, Corfu, Kefalonia, Lefkada, Thessaloniki and Athens. They fall into three main categories:

1. Permanent residents who have been living and working in Greece often for many years, paying Greek national insurance and tax, likely married to or divorced from Greek citizens often with dual national children in the education system. Some are in receipt of a Greek pension. Many are property and business owners. They mostly use Greek state health care. They are usually registered but sometimes relatively recently so their permit does not reflect the years they have actually been in Greece. Some of them have been incorrectly re-issued with the registration certificate after five years rather than the permanent residency permit. Others had gaps between their residence permits so were returned to 'Year 1' despite having proof of continuous residency.
2. UK pensioners with reciprocal S1 coverage for health care. Mostly permanent residents, property owners and tax resident. Usually registered.
3. In betweeners. Those with summer homes who are in Greece for only four to five months (often with the intention of moving permanently on retirement), those who have retired early in the UK and have already moved permanently to Greece and are 'making do' until they become eligible for a UK pension, seasonal workers and those moving between the UK and Greece for work or family obligations, those living in Greece but working online for UK companies and yacht owners who live part or all of the year on their boat moored in Greek waters. Quite often not registered. Many using a UK EHIC for health care.

Present situation

We are waiting for the Greek legislation but are aware that Greece has chosen the constitutive route for the issue of our new permits. We are educating our members about the terms of the WA and urging them to register as EU citizens by 31/12 in order to be covered by its terms. We also advise on an upgrade from the registration certificate to the permanent residence permit where possible. Applications for these permits are made in the Aliens' Offices in Athens and in the local police stations elsewhere. Immigration officers are usually co-operative and there are very few cases where applications have been rejected.

As regards Greek citizenship, the government has shown considerable willing by fast tracking the applications of UK citizens thereby reducing the process from 5/6 years to 1/2 . A few of us have applied and are in various stages of the process. We run a separate group to help our members prepare for the citizenship interview but as you need in-depth knowledge of Greek language, history and culture it is not a solution for the majority.

Main issues and vulnerabilities

- There are an estimated 25,000 UK citizens in Greece. We know that there are an unknown number who have not registered for reasons ranging from ignorance and fear to arrogance and stupidity. As they will presumably lose their rights to live and work in Greece these people need reaching by the end of the year.
- We still don't know any of the details of how, when and where we will apply for our new biometric permits. Many of our members are worried they might not meet the criteria because even though the terms of the WA state that these cannot be stricter than those with which we registered as EU citizens, can we be sure the Greek immigration authorities will treat us as leniently as they do now when we reapply? This will be especially true if we are all sent to the main Aliens' Offices for TCNs where chaos reigns and the immigration officers are much stricter. At present, despite the existence of a national directive there are considerable variations from one area to another regarding the documentation required to register and this adds to the sense of insecurity that it might not be plain sailing when applying for our new permits and some of us could fall through the cracks in some sort of a postcode lottery. Furthermore, as already described, there have been inconsistencies in the issuing of existing permits which at the time seemed unimportant but we now realise could penalise UK citizens who have genuinely been living in Greece for many years and have a paper trail to prove it. This seemingly contradicts EU directives and some members have taken their case to Solvit but got nowhere. I can provide you with more specific details on potential problems with the reapplication procedure if you wish.
- On 23/3 the Greek government banned all flights from the UK. This has prevented some members from getting to Greece to apply for the Registration Certificate. Immigration offices are also largely closed confounding efforts to register by members who are already in Greece.
- Members are worried that they will be discriminated against in the workplace with the new permit. For example, applying for a job in the Greek state sector requires you to

submit your Greek ID number or EU residence permit number. Will there be a special category for UK nationals who have the new biometric permits?

- The 'in-betweeners' category is particularly vulnerable to tightened border control post transition. Without a residence permit in Greece they will no longer be able to stay over 90 days in any 180. But if they apply for a permit they have to stay longer than 6 months in any 12 and become Greek tax resident. This is often incompatible with their lifestyles. We could dismiss this category as being unimportant but many of them have invested in property in Greece which they might no longer be able to use as they have been accustomed to using it for many years. And for a fair few their legitimate dream of retiring to Greece is shattered. They should have rights too.
- We have no channel of communication with the British Embassy or with the Greek government despite repeated attempts. Both refer to stock links if you write to them and the Embassy Outreach meetings were a regurgitation of facts we already know. The general sentiment is that we have been abandoned despite some shabby attempts at window dressing which are fooling no-one.

Conclusion

We hope that the long awaited Greek legislation will be friendly and clear and that the instructions given to immigration officers will facilitate a smooth and consistent transition to the biometric cards across Greece. We also hope that in practice our new status will be identical to that which we enjoyed as EU citizens. But if this is not the case I can identify three areas in which we will need professional help from a lawyer.

- First, to check that the upcoming Greek legislation is fair and conforms to the terms of the WA.
- Second, to clarify the procedure in any upcoming circular (εγκύκλιος). This is the bit of paper that will be on the desk between us and our immigration officer so it all boils down to this. If we can have the specifics of our rights as set out in the circular confirmed by a lawyer, it will be easier for us to stand our ground in the immigration offices if there are any problems. Furthermore, if the terms of the circular are unclear or open to different interpretations (as they often are), we would hope to put pressure on the Greek government to quickly amend them and we would need a lawyer to do this.
- Finally, to offer advice on any cases of discrimination both during and after transition.