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Britain and the E.U. strike a deal to scrap most food border checks

A youth mobility plan would let up to 100,000 people a year live and work on each side by 2030

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The United Kingdom and the European Union reached a new agreement on food and drink trade and a youth mobility program at their summit in Brussels on November 20, opening the way for fewer trade checks on many agricultural products and a new channel for young people to work in hospitality on both sides.

The deal was welcomed by UKHospitality, which said the measures could eventually ease pressure on supply chains and help employers facing staffing shortages, even though neither change is expected to bring immediate relief.

Under the food and drink agreement, the vast majority of sanitary and phytosanitary checks and related paperwork for trade in food and agricultural goods between the UK and the EU are expected to be removed. Products such as meat, dairy and fish could benefit from the end of export health certificates and routine border checks, although the changes are not due to take effect until March 1, 2028, and still depend on required legal and administrative steps.

Allen Simpson, chief executive of UKHospitality, said the agreement could help reduce one of the sector’s fastest-rising costs. He said food and drink inflation had been a major source of pressure for hospitality businesses and expressed hope that the trade changes would make the supply chain less expensive.

That matters beyond kitchens. If fewer border checks and less paperwork lower friction for imports from the continent, pubs, bars and restaurants could also see easier access to European wines, beers, spirits and other drink ingredients. Any benefit for beverage operators, however, would depend on how much of the lower cost is actually passed through the supply chain.

The British government said the wider agreement could add £5.1 billion a year to the UK economy by 2040. But ministers also cautioned against assuming that lower trade barriers would quickly show up as lower prices for consumers or businesses.

Business Secretary Jonathan Reynolds said on BBC Breakfast on November 20 that he could not guarantee food would become cheaper because other factors would continue to affect prices. Even so, he said cutting bureaucracy, border friction and physical and electronic checks should remove costs from the supply chain.

For hospitality operators, that leaves a mixed picture. Businesses that buy food or drink from European suppliers may face fewer administrative hurdles over time, but the timing and scale of the savings remain uncertain. Much will depend on implementation, pricing decisions by suppliers and distributors, and broader inflation pressures across

the economy.

The summit also produced a Youth Experience Scheme that would allow up to 100,000 people a year from each side, ages 18 to 31, to live, work, study and travel in the other jurisdiction for as long as three years. The program would be visa-based, would not give participants access to benefits, and would not allow them to bring dependents. It is intended to be in place by January 2030 at the latest.

UKHospitality said the scheme could restore a long-standing flow of young workers between Britain and Europe, giving them a chance to learn in different hospitality markets and return with new skills. That could be important for restaurants, hotels, pubs and bars that have struggled to recruit since the UK left the EU's freedom of movement system.

Even so, the plan is not expected to solve labor shortages in the near term. The program will be capped, it remains years away from launch, and businesses still face immediate recruitment pressures. Employers looking for staff for front-of-house roles, kitchens and bar operations are unlikely to see any direct effect for some time.

The agreement also prompted fresh political discussion about the UK's longer-term relationship with the EU. Prime Minister Andy Burnham said he respected the 2016 Brexit vote but argued that both the UK and the EU had changed since then. He said he wanted informal talks with European leaders over the coming year to explore future options, while adding that the November 20 agreements were probably the limit of what could be achieved in the current Parliament.

Burnham also said that any bigger decision about the UK's future ties with the bloc would fall to the next Parliament and should not move ahead of public opinion.

For now, the practical significance of the summit lies in the slower, technical changes it may bring to cross-border trade and labor mobility. Hospitality groups see potential gains in lower friction for imported goods and a broader pool of young workers. But both parts of the agreement are set on long timelines, and the final effect on costs, staffing and prices will depend on how the measures are carried out in the years ahead.