BRIEFING · UK–EU RELATIONS · TRADE · PUBLIC AFFAIRS

The second UK–EU summit: what was agreed, and what it will take

On 20 November 2026 the UK and the EU concluded three agreements in Brussels and left a fourth unfinished. This briefing sets the outcome out twice: first as law and procedure, then as politics.

> Status as at 20 November 2026. The Joint Statement is a political declaration and the explainers are government guides. None of the three agreements is law, and their legal texts are not published.

In brief

- **Three agreements were concluded, none is yet law.** A food and farm-goods (SPS) agreement, a link between the UK and EU carbon markets, and a Youth Experience Scheme. Each still has to be finalised, signed and ratified on both sides.
- **They are tied together.** The Joint Statement looks to all three entering into force jointly and on time (paragraph 50).
- **One item is unfinished.** An agreement on university tuition fees is to be concluded within six months (paragraph 41). Press reports say the EU treats the package as depending on it.
- **The method is the argument.** The SPS and carbon agreements work by the UK applying EU rules as they change, with a say in shaping them and no vote. Supporters call that the price of removing a border; opponents call it rule-taking.
- **Northern Ireland gains most on paper** and carries the most open questions: fewer checks from Great Britain, an end to the UK border charge on EU inputs, and a carbon link that must pass the Assembly in an election year.

Part one: in technical terms

What exists, and what stage it has reached

Instrument	What it is	Stage on 20 November 2026	Target date	Still to happen
SPS agreement	A common area for food, animal and plant rules. Removes most certificates and checks between Great Britain and the EU, extended to movements into NI	Negotiations concluded (para 48). Text not published	1 March 2028	Signature, UK and EU ratification, UK legislation
Carbon market link	UK and EU allowances usable in either scheme. The two schemes stay separate but linked	Negotiations concluded (para 49). Explainer published; text not published	1 January 2028 (government explainer); "from 2028" (Joint Statement)	Signature, ratification, legislation in 2027, registry changes
Carbon border exemptions	Each side stops charging its border carbon charge on the other's goods	Political commitment, "subject to respective laws and procedures"	UK: intended from 1 January 2027. EU: expected from 1 January 2028	UK regulations under the Finance Act 2026; an EU act adding the UK to Annex III of Regulation (EU) 2023/956

Instrument	What it is	Stage on 20 November 2026	Target date	Still to happen
Youth Experience Scheme	100,000 young people a year each way, aged 18 to 31, for up to three years. Visa-based, capped, no benefits, no dependants	Negotiations concluded (para 39)	Apply no later than 2028; first places by January 2030	Signature, ratification, labour-market terms to be published before signature
Tuition fees	A supplementing agreement to the Trade and Cooperation Agreement on fees for each other's students	Not agreed. Commitment to conclude within six months (para 41)	By about May 2027	Negotiation
Electricity trading	UK participation in the EU's internal electricity market	Talks continuing	To conclude in 2027 (para 52)	Negotiation, linked in the Joint Statement to a UK contribution to EU regional cohesion
Erasmus+	UK takes part in the 2027 programme year	In place; funding call opened 18 November 2026 (para 38)	2027	Any role after 2027 is still to be explored
Energy Title of the 2020 trade agreement	The energy chapter, which would otherwise lapse	Extended to 31 March 2027, with a further extension to 31 March 2028 welcomed (para 45)	31 March 2028	Formal decisions
Fishing access	Reciprocal access to waters	Recorded as running to 30 June 2038 (para 47)	2038	None stated
Security and defence	The 2025 partnership, UK part in EU civilian missions and the Ukraine Support Loan	Implementation continuing (paras 21 to 34)	Rolling	Further arrangements
Steel and Northern Ireland	A long-term solution for steel supply to NI	Planned, not agreed (para 72)	None given	Negotiation

Paragraph numbers refer to the Joint Statement, as summarised from the GOV.UK text on 20 November 2026.

How the main agreements work

Dynamic alignment. For food rules and for the carbon market, the UK undertakes to apply the relevant EU rules as they are amended. The government's explainer on the carbon link says the UK gets an early role in shaping rules still in development, and that the UK ETS Authority keeps its decision-making powers. On the carbon side the UK gives up its auction reserve price and, from 2031, ties its cap to a share of the EU's.

Disputes and oversight. The summit papers I could read do not describe the dispute mechanism for either agreement. The 2025 Common Understanding pointed to independent arbitration, with the Court of Justice of the EU as the authority on questions of EU law. Whether the final texts follow that is not confirmed until they are published.

Money. A government factsheet says nothing in the SPS, carbon or youth agreements requires UK taxpayers to pay into the EU budget. The Joint Statement separately links the electricity talks to a UK financial contribution to EU regional cohesion. Costs of taking part in EU agencies and systems are not set out in the papers read.

Benefits claimed. The government puts the food agreement at up to £5.1bn a year and the carbon link at up to £3.8bn a year by 2040, with about £6.5bn of exports, by value, in scope of the EU carbon border charge. The methods are not yet published; the government says impact assessments will come with the legislation.

Northern Ireland. The food agreement's benefits are extended to movements from Great Britain to NI through its interplay with the Windsor Framework; customs formalities are a separate matter and the papers read do not say they change. NI power stations stay in the EU carbon market. The UK's intended border-charge exemption for EU goods matters most here, because NI firms buy across a land border. The carbon link also removes the 50% reduction for ferry voyages between NI and Great Britain.

Not yet published

The legal texts of all three agreements. The dispute and governance provisions. Exit and termination terms beyond what the carbon explainer gives. Impact assessments. The UK regulations for the border-charge exemption. The labour-market terms of the youth scheme.

Part two: in political terms

What each side says

The UK government presents the package as practical deals that cut paperwork, ease food prices and open opportunities for young people. The Prime Minister, Andy Burnham, called it a "win-win" at the Brussels press conference (press reports, 20 November 2026). Its own factsheet is framed as a rebuttal of two charges: that the UK is paying into the EU budget, and that the youth scheme is free movement.

The EU presents it as delivery on the agenda agreed in London in May 2025. The Commission President spoke of a turning point, and the President of the European Council said the EU remained open to the closest possible relationship (press reports, 20 November 2026). The EU's price is visible in the text: youth mobility, tuition fees and a contribution linked to electricity.

Reform UK opposes it. Nigel Farage called it "not a reset, it's a reverse" and said the Prime Minister had no mandate (LBC, 20 November 2026). The party has said it would abolish the UK carbon market and border charge (press reports, 26 October 2026).

The Conservatives oppose rule-taking in principle and pledged on 1 April 2026 to abolish the UK carbon market, Carbon Price Support and the border charge (press reports). I found no primary statement from the party on the summit itself; a report that it would scrap agreements requiring dynamic alignment comes from a single outlet and is unverified.

The Liberal Democrats and the Scottish Government support a carbon link and closer ties; both positions pre-date the summit (party conference policy, autumn 2025; Scottish Government paper). I found no primary reaction from either to the summit text.

In Northern Ireland, the DAERA Minister, Andrew Muir, welcomed both the food and carbon agreements and stressed that they remain subject to scrutiny and ratification (DAERA, 20 November 2026). Sinn Féin welcomed the food agreement; unionist representatives welcomed fewer checks while objecting to alignment with EU rules and calling for the Irish Sea border to go altogether (local press, 20 November 2026). The Irish government welcomed the food agreement (gov.ie, 20 November 2026).

Where the argument lies

Sovereignty against friction. The trade the agreements free is real and so is the constraint. The honest version of each case is the same sentence read two ways: the UK applies rules it does not vote on, in exchange for selling without a border.

Migration. The youth scheme is capped, time-limited, visa-based and carries no benefits or dependants. Critics count it as 100,000 arrivals a year; supporters count 100,000 places for young Britons. Both figures are in the text.

Students and money. Tuition fees are the unfinished item and the one with a direct cost to universities and the Treasury. If it stalls, the joint entry into force in paragraph 50 gives it leverage over everything else.

Durability. Two parties that could form or shape the next government say they would unwind the carbon measures. The carbon link can be ended on 18 to 30 months' notice. Firms will price that risk into contracts that run past the next general election.

The devolved timetable. Changes to the UK carbon market have needed approval in all four legislatures. The Assembly is due to dissolve in late March 2027 for an election in May. An Order not approved by then waits for a new Assembly.

What a firm should take from the politics. Plan on the agreements applying in 2028, and write contracts that still work if they are late or reversed.

Dates to watch

Date	Event
Late November 2026	Legislation reported as due before Parliament (press report; the explainer refers to a European Partnership Bill)
1 January 2027	UK carbon border charge starts; the intended exemption for EU, EEA and Swiss goods needs regulations by then
Early 2027	EU–UK Digital Partnership to launch (para 54)
Late March 2027	NI Assembly dissolves; election in May
31 March 2027	Current end date of the Energy Title, before further extension
About May 2027	Six months for the tuition fees agreement
During 2027	Electricity market talks to conclude; UK and EU legislation for the carbon link
1 January 2028	Carbon link intended to operate; EU exemption for UK goods expected
1 March 2028	Food and farm-goods agreement intended to apply
30 September 2028	First joint surrender of carbon allowances
January 2030	First youth scheme places, at the latest

Sources and method

- Cabinet Office, UK/EU Summit 2026: Key documents, 20 November 2026: Joint Statement and the explainers on the carbon link and the Youth Experience Scheme. The SPS explainer could not be opened; the food agreement is described from the Joint Statement and the summary explainer.
- DESNZ, UK-EU linking agreement: explainer, 20 November 2026.
- Cabinet Office, UK-EU Summit package: factsheet and mythbuster, November 2026.
- European External Action Service, EU-UK Summit, 20 November 2026: joint statement released.
- DAERA and gov.ie news releases, 20 November 2026.
- Political statements are from press reports (RTÉ, LBC and others, 20 November 2026) and are labelled as such. Party positions on the carbon measures are from press reports of 1 April and 26 October 2026 and from published party and government papers.
- Created with assistive technology including AI and re-checked against the official sources listed. Official pages were read through a summarising tool, so check wording on the page before quoting. It is general information, not legal, tax or customs advice.

Robert J. Park is an independent environment, carbon and public affairs consultant based in Larne, Northern Ireland. robert@robertjpark.co.uk · 07450 349480 · robertjpark.co.uk · General information, not legal, tax or customs advice. Status as at 20 November 2026.