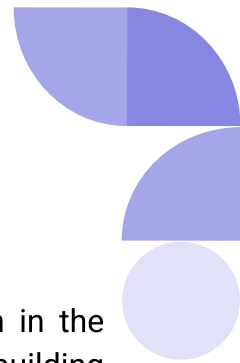


# **Why is the UK getting it wrong on immigration? And what needs to change?**

## **Report summary**

This short form note offers a summary of the policy report, Time For Change: The evidence-based policies that can actually fix the immigration system, published by Another Europe Is Possible and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in December 2025



## Summary

The Labour government's approach to immigration so far has been a failure. Both in the outcomes for migrants themselves and for British communities, and in terms of building public support and regaining control of the narrative from Reform UK. The party has become mired in a spiral of escalating shifts to the right in rhetoric, combined with symbolic policies to signal hostility that are failing to actually get to grips with the perceived problems, or create a system that works for communities and delivers for the economy.

This no-win situation needs to be reversed, and can be, by presenting a radically different direction on immigration that responds pragmatically to the country's economic needs, and creates space for improved social cohesion and community relations.

1. The UK needs immigration to sustain growth and fund public services in an ageing society.
2. People will keep seeking safety and opportunity here. Policy needs to manage this in a safe, orderly, fair and responsible way.
3. Protecting migrants' rights strengthens, not weakens, community wellbeing and labour standards, moving us towards a more fair and equal society.

## International context

When looking to other countries, politicians often fail to take into account fundamental differences that make comparisons unworkable in the British context. The Labour government is modelling its approach on Denmark. However, the adoption of hardline policies targeted at asylum seekers by the Danish centre-left has not successfully neutered the anti-immigrant debate led by the right, and recent election results show it losing significant ground to its progressive left, too, echoing the precise squeeze that the UK Labour party needs to extricate itself from.

When the Danish government enacted hostile policies to make the country less attractive to asylum seekers, it did not have to reckon with factors that make the UK attractive and cannot be changed. The UK has forged deep connections all over the world through our history of colonialism. Roughly 70% of the asylum seekers in the past 20 years come from countries that were previously colonies or protectorates of the UK. They rightly feel familiarity with the UK, may speak English, and know that they are likely to find established communities here, who will be able to support them. Additionally, Denmark's birthrate, while still below replacement, is somewhat higher than the UK's and not falling year-on-year, as the UK's is. The UK's need for immigrant labour to sustain its welfare state is thus more acute.

A more suitable model is Spain, another former great colonial power with high immigration and an aging population problem even more advanced than our own. The Spanish Prime Minister is forcefully bucking the trend of anti-migrant politics, and reaping rewards. There is now a fairly strong pro-immigration voice in Spanish politics and a consensus among left and centre-left parties. The Spanish economy is growing faster than any other European country, thanks in large part to successful integration of immigrants including asylum seekers.

## A 9-point plan for change

There are three priority policy areas to fix the immigration system: asylum, work, and integration. In each of these areas three evidence-based changes would make a significant impact to reduce irregular arrivals, drive up working conditions for all, and build robust and cohesive communities.

### *Asylum:*

#### **1. Safe, regulated routes to replace irregular arrivals**

Ending Channel deaths must be a moral priority, just as ending irregular arrivals is clearly the most urgent political priority. Polling shows that if irregular boat arrivals are reduced, the public would tolerate an increase in legal arrivals of asylum seekers. The only evidence-based way to achieve this is to introduce safe and regulated alternative ways to travel for those currently risking their lives on boats. A system modelled on the successful visa pathway for Ukrainians who could apply from across Europe for travel authorisation, enacted at a scale capable of truly responding to need, would eliminate the market for smugglers.

#### **2. The right to work and faster, better asylum decisions**

Instead of fast-tracking asylum refusals, which inevitably forces more people into a second backlog of the appeals processes and risks miscarriages of justice, asylum seekers escaping clearly unsafe countries such as Sudan and Eritrea should undergo a light-touch process to swiftly grant them status and get them out of asylum limbo. Those with more complex individual claims should have greater time and resource dedicated to them, but should have the right to work if the process is long, to ensure they can support themselves. Research suggests that integration and employment support for asylum seekers from arrival can provide a net economic benefit.

#### **3. A not-for-profit accommodation system**

Asylum accommodation contracts have become a lucrative way for companies to extract vast sums from government while providing a substandard service.

The asylum accommodation system should not put public money in private hands, but help contribute to the development of better housing stock for all in need. Local Authorities must be funded to identify and refurbish suitable housing to create stock of a standard acceptable to any homeless constituent, whether local or refugee.

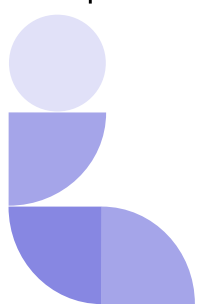
### *Work:*

#### **4. Reform labour inspection and protections from workplace exploitation**

Labour standards enforcement must be decoupled entirely from immigration control, ending the loopholes that prevent migrant workers from benefiting from efforts to tackle exploitation, low pay and trafficking.

#### **5. Scrap restrictive employer-sponsored visas**

Most working visas tie workers to a single employer, creating an imbalance of power between employer and employee as the worker relies on their job for their right to live in the country. These restrictions create a two-tier workforce and should be scrapped and replaced by a true points-based system where everyone granted leave to work in the UK competes on a level playing field in the labour market. In Australia this approach has significantly improved economic outcomes.



## **6. Integrate asylum seekers into the points-based visa system**

Asylum seekers are part of the broader picture of immigration to the UK, but we keep them separate, forced into inactivity which impacts their long-term employment prospects and denies us the potential skills that they could offer. By allowing asylum seekers to accrue points to potentially earn a visa, we would end the absurd situation we find ourselves in of actively recruiting overseas for workers on the one hand – sometimes unethically poaching needed talent from abroad – all while keeping potential workers in forced idleness in the asylum system on the other.

*Integration:*

### **7.A simplified, universal pathway to settlement after five years**

The immigration visa system is unnecessarily punitive and complex. Different types of leave either ‘count’ or don’t towards long-term residence requirements and people employed in different areas have different criteria to qualify for settlement, resulting in one of the world’s most expensive systems, particularly for families. Frequent changes to this system pull the rug out from under the feet of settled immigrants, creating precarity, stress and leading to poverty and debt. Some categories of worker are treated as disposable and never accrue rights to settlement. This is unnecessarily difficult for migrants and creates expensive, often inefficient bureaucracy for the state. Simpler pathways to settlement promote inclusion and economic empowerment, reduce the number of people who become undocumented, living outside the legal immigration system, and better reflecting public opinion that favours integration over churn.

## **8. Reintroduce birthright citizenship and reduce integration barriers for children**

The public largely believes that people who were born in the UK and have never known any other home are British, but they are not automatically entitled to citizenship. The prospect of excluding these people from educational opportunities, charging high visa fees for their continued residence, and excluding them from state support systems is frankly unfair and simply penalises people who are extremely likely to live here for their entire lives.

It is impossible to fulfil government ambitions to eradicate child poverty as long as the children of migrants who are British in all but paperwork are excluded because of their parents’ immigration status.

## **9. Embrace a positive narrative about immigration, diversity and belonging**

In the current climate, telling a positive story about immigration may seem difficult, but it has simply never been more crucial to do so. The centre ground of politics has shamefully ceded the ground of the national conversation to the right on this issue, creating a climate of fear within not only migrant, but also ethnic minority British communities. Labour’s approach so far has been at best confused, and served to raise the salience of immigration and the perception that it is a threat, which has been shown to drive support for the far right. Abandoning this counter-productive approach will take guts, but the current political moment demands that courage.