

SHIFTING VIEWS

Tracking attitudes to immigration in 2022

*Findings from the Ipsos/British Future
immigration attitudes tracker*

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I. Introduction

Public attitudes on immigration, as with some other issues, are often misunderstood. They can be misinterpreted – sometimes deliberately. Attitudes can be fickle, shifting over time or in response to events; and can even seem contradictory, with people supporting apparently opposing positions at the same time. Yet in a democratic society, where politicians can feel under pressure to respond to public and media pressure when an issue is of high salience, attitudes matter.

These latest findings, from Ipsos research that has tracked public attitudes on the issue since 2015, offer the most authoritative picture on where public opinion is today and how that compares to recent years.

The focus of the UK's immigration debate has shifted in recent years, from East European workers to asylum seekers once again – and attitudes are mixed but nuanced on refugee issues too. People have grown more positive about immigration to the UK over time, but remain more divided over the heated issue of asylum and Channel crossings.

There is little awareness that, at a time of high immigration for work and study, most of the public are relatively relaxed about the impact of immigration. Support for reducing immigration is at its lowest level in seven years. Many would welcome more migration to fill skills and labour gaps in particular areas, for example in the care sector and the NHS. Yet there is also a curious paradox. While the British public has changed its mind significantly on immigration, they are largely unaware that this has happened. Around half of us are moderate 'balancers' on the issue but believe – wrongly, as this study shows – that other people's attitudes are getting tougher.

Some of this misperception may have been picked up from media and political debate, which largely overlooks migration for work and study to focus on increasingly heated and polarised debates about asylum and those arriving in the UK in small boats. This study identifies ongoing public concern over Channel crossings, which remain the most common reason for people to be dissatisfied with government immigration policy.

Yet it would be wrong, too, to paint the public as hostile to those seeking protection here. Public sympathy and support for refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine was echoed by media and politicians alike. Indeed, we witnessed the unusual phenomenon of right-wing media outlets barracking the government for not getting refugees *into* the country fast enough. Nor was the public response mere transient virtue signalling: tens of thousands of people came forward offering to house Ukrainian refugees in their own homes. Millions still say they would be willing to do something to help, such as offering people assistance learning English.¹ People can

simultaneously feel sympathy for people seeking safety from war, and concern at the lack of control over Channel boat crossings.

Understanding public attitudes on immigration matters because it affects policy. The Rwanda policy is a response from government to urgent calls for something to be done about Channel crossings. There are many reasons why it is the wrong response. As this report finds, most people think it will offer poor value for money and will not have the intended effect of reducing the number of people coming to the UK seeking asylum. There is a strong moral case, too, against a policy that washes Britain's hands of responsibility for people seeking safety, without giving them a fair chance to have their case heard. But it is also a misreading of public opinion: where people want control and compassion in our approach to immigration, the Rwanda scheme offers a choice between one or the other. No opinion poll has found majority support for the Rwanda policy and this research finds the same. That none has found a majority opposing it either suggests that campaigners have more work to do in proposing alternative responses to Channel crossings which, as we see in this report, remain a significant source of public concern.

The post-Brexit points-based system for immigration for work was a response to what much of the public wanted: openness to the immigration that our economy needs, but control over who can and cannot come here. The vast majority of those who move to the UK do so through such visa routes for work, or to study at British universities. Public consent for this is demonstrated by warm public attitudes to immigration at a time when numbers are relatively high.

A better understanding of where public attitudes are on immigration is a useful corrective to negative caricatures of the British public in our political debate. We are more divided than we would like, but we have more common ground than we are led to believe. Most people are not for 'pulling up the drawbridge' nor for 'open borders'. The median view on immigration has grown significantly warmer over the seven years of this tracker, but more people are 'Balancers' on immigration and would support policies that reflect this moderate mindset. Our debates about immigration, in politics and in the media, still need to catch up with the reality of where people are.

2. About this report and the immigration attitudes tracker

This report presents new findings from the Immigration Tracker conducted by Ipsos for British Future. This nationally representative survey of 3,004 adults across Great Britain aged 18+, conducted online between 19th July and 3rd August 2022, is the latest of 14 waves of research into public attitudes to immigration since February/March 2015.

As a tracker survey, the Immigration Tracker enables changes in attitudes to be identified over time as political, economic and social contexts change. Data have been weighted by age, gender, region, social grade and educational attainment to match the profile of the population.

British Future has analysed public responses to a range of questions, looking at differences by characteristics such as age, gender, social class and region as well as political allegiances. Where questions were asked in earlier waves of the tracker, we have looked for movement over time.

The full tables showing the findings of this wave of the tracker are published online by Ipsos at <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/immigration-tracker-october-2022>.

We have also examined how responses to policy questions vary by people's broad perspectives on immigration. Our previous work has found that, while some people are strongly opposed to immigration and others are strongly in favour, most people typically hold a mix of views. We asked people to give a 0-10 score to indicate whether they feel immigration has had a positive or negative impact on Britain (with 0 very negative and 10 very positive) and used these scores to segment people into three groups: 'migration sceptics', 'migration liberals' and the 'balancers' who sit somewhere in between. Around half of respondents to the immigration tracker survey are balancers, giving a score of 4-7 (47%). Roughly a quarter are 'migration liberals', giving a score in the upper reaches of 8-10 (23%); while a similar proportion are 'migration sceptics', giving a score of 0-3 (22%). These classifications are used to shed light on responses to some more detailed areas of policy and differ slightly from the categories used by Ipsos when showing trends over time.² Both scales are used within the analysis of the report.

The authors would like to thank the team at Ipsos UK for conducting the fieldwork and for their support with analysis and survey design. We would also like to thank David Young and Jake Puddle for their work on this report.

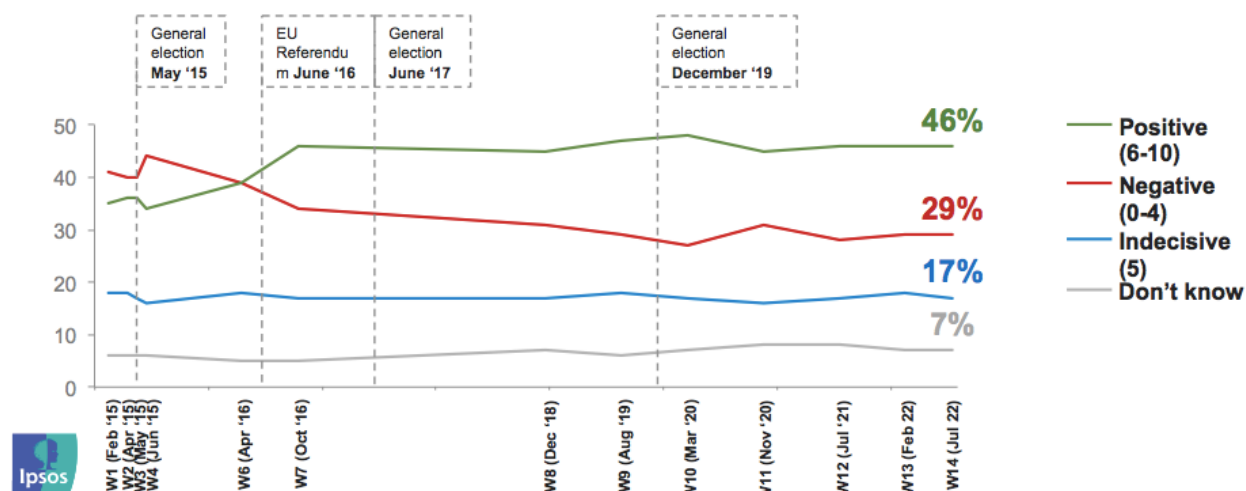
The Immigration Attitudes Tracker project is funded by Unbound Philanthropy and the Barrow Cadbury Trust. We are grateful for their ongoing support.

3. From contentious to consensus: immigration in 2022

Attitudes to immigration today remain among the most positive since the tracker began. This might be seen as surprising during this period of political and economic turbulence. Almost half of the population believes that migration has had a positive impact on Britain, while less than a third believes it to be negative. As Figure 3.1 shows, this is almost a mirror image of attitudes seven years ago when 44% of people saw its impact as negative and a third as positive.

Figure 3.1 Attitudes towards the impact of immigration: more Britons are positive than negative

On a scale of 0 to 10, has migration had a positive or negative impact on Britain? (0 is “very negative”, 10 is “very positive”)

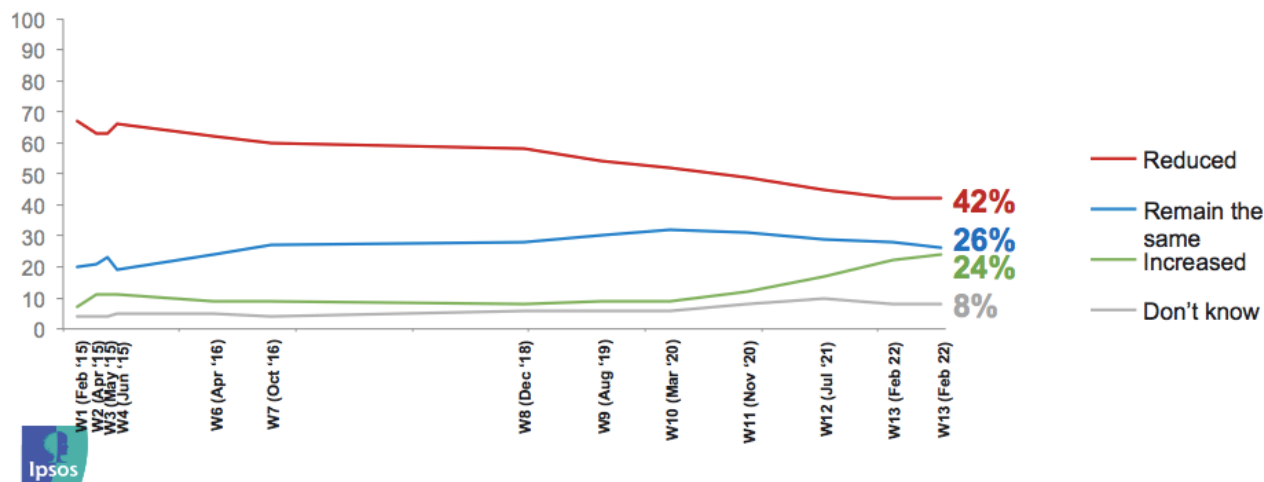


Base: All respondents (W1: 4574; W2: 3770; W3: 3023; W4: 2698; W6: 4002; W7: 4071; W8: 2520; W9: 2006; W10: 2100; W11: 2532; W12: 4000; W13: 3206; W14: 3004); Fieldwork dates: 19 July to 3 August 2022

At almost a quarter (24 per cent), the proportion of people who think that the number of migrants coming to Britain should be increased is also at the highest ever recorded in seven years of the tracker survey; and at 42% the proportion who think it should be reduced at its lowest.

Figure 3.2 Support for reduction in immigration numbers remains at its lowest level

Do you think the number of immigrants coming to Britain nowadays should be increased a lot, increased a little, remain the same as it is, reduced a little, or reduced a lot?



Base: All respondents (W1: 4574; W2: 3770; W3: 3023; W4: 2698; W6: 4002; W7: 4071; W8: 2520; W9: 2006; W10: 2100; W11: 2532; W12: 4000; W13: 3206; W14: 3004); Fieldwork dates: 19 July to 3 August 2022

The positive direction of travel for immigration attitudes since 2016 can be attributed to three influences. These affect people differently according to their age and political allegiance, but they are also mutually reinforcing. The first is increased discussion and awareness of the contribution of migrants to the economy and society. Secondly, more positive attitudes towards migrants in key sectors, including health and transport, were then strengthened through awareness of their role during the pandemic.

The third and continuing influence is the ongoing shortage of skills and labour in a range of sectors and occupations. The government has tried to address these shortages through adjustments to the new points based system, but with limited success. At the same time, the end of free movement has provided reassurance, to Leave and Conservative supporters in particular, that the UK has control over immigration. All of these considerations help to make the public's appraisal of the contribution of migrants more positive: as we show later, four in ten people, and most Conservatives, prefer an immigration system which prioritises controlling immigration, whether or not numbers are reduced.

Concern about immigration has been displaced by other issues

The dominance of issues other than immigration, in politics and in people's personal lives, is also likely to have influenced our findings on trends in attitudes towards immigration. While in the past immigration was an issue of high public salience, this has not been the case for some time.

During the survey period, the public and media were focused on economic issues, with high levels of public concern about inflation, fuel bills and dramatic increases in the cost of living. These worries have been brewing for some time, taking off after the pandemic as incomes fell, job insecurity increased and inflation soared.

The political agenda at the time of the survey was dominated by the Conservative Party leadership election, in which migration made only an occasional appearance. Liz Truss mentioned a commitment to expanding the seasonal workers' scheme and Rishi Sunak talked of reducing the number of 'illegal migrants'. At the same time, Government proposals to deport to Rwanda those arriving independently in the UK to seek asylum had a high media profile at the time of our survey, both within and outside of coverage of the leadership election.

The public salience of migration, while not high since shortly after the referendum, has now slipped further down the public's list. The latest Ipsos Issues Index finds that inflation and prices tops the list of concerns, with 54% of the public seeing this as a key issue.³ This is followed by the related issue of the economy, important for 36% of people, and then climate change and the NHS. Lack of faith in politics and politicians, following the Partygate scandals but also linked to cost of living worries, is also on the list. Other policy issues are eclipsed by these worries and migration only just makes it into the top ten.

Tracker respondents report these pressures in their own lives: just under one in five (18%) say they are living comfortably on their present income, down from 28% in 2016. Almost a third of people (32%) say it is difficult or very difficult on their present income compared to 21% in 2016.

It might be seen as counter-intuitive that attitudes to immigration have warmed while people's circumstances have worsened. However, this makes sense when people no longer see immigration as a threat to their jobs, to schools and the health service.⁴ Around half (47%) are balancers on migration, giving a score of 4-7 out of 10 when asked whether migration is positive or negative for Britain, and seeing the benefits and the pressures. A further 23% are migration liberals who rate the impact of migration at 8-10.

Therefore for many who see its impact as positive, migration is seen to have a legitimate part to play in addressing the current adverse circumstances, with reports of labour shortages and problems with the supply of goods and services. This is reflected in attitudes to immigration and the NHS, where people are much more likely to see its impact as positive than negative.⁵ As we show later, this view is shared across political divides with strong support for increased migration into health, social care and seasonal agricultural work among Labour and Conservative supporters.

These warmer attitudes reflect the context in which migration is discussed. With frequent media reports of unfilled vacancies, the narrative that migrants take jobs from British workers or that

employers prefer to recruit migrants is heard far less often than before the EU referendum. When shops and cafes display ‘staff wanted’ notices and health and transport services are affected by staff shortages, the view that migrants are not needed will be much less credible than when vacancies were low and unemployment high.

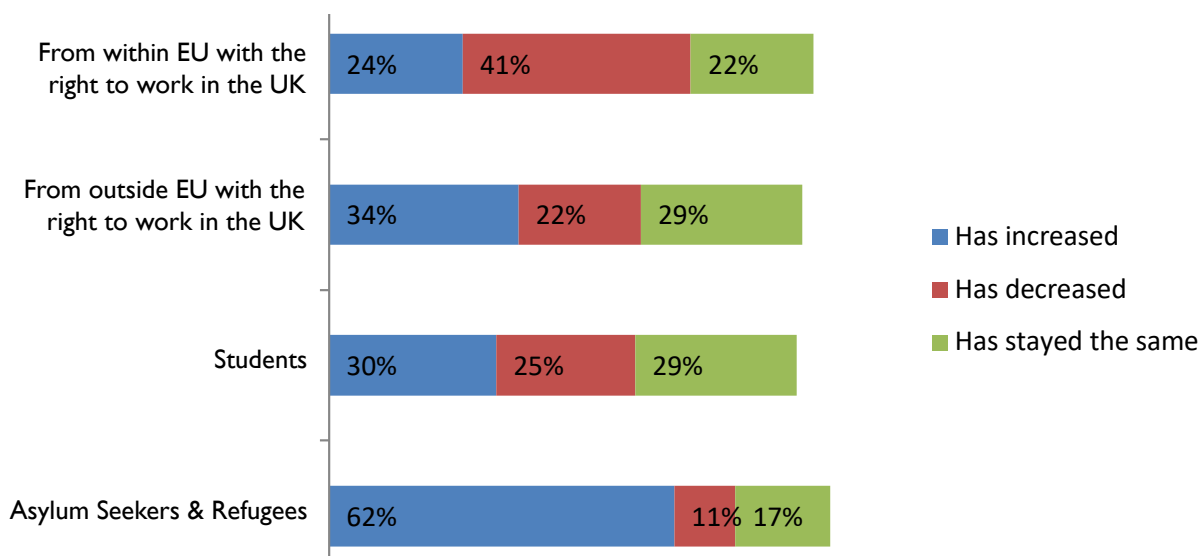
Asylum seekers and refugees are seen differently: for some people they are the key migration policy issue and the focus of negative opinion. As we show later, there is less public consensus and agreement on this issue, particularly with regard to irregular arrivals by boat across the Channel.

Are people well informed about migration trends?

Some might argue that the positive direction of travel for immigration attitudes is due to lack of public understanding of recent patterns and trends, in particular a lack of awareness that immigration has increased in recent years. Public understanding of trends in migration is presented in Figure 3.3 below.

Broadly speaking, people are more likely to be right than wrong about the direction of key trends. Where numbers have risen, more people think they have risen than fallen; and where numbers have fallen, more people think they have fallen than risen. However, significant proportions think the numbers have stayed the same, which means that (except in the case of asylum seekers) only a minority of the public give the right answer: that migration from the EU has fallen since 2016 while migration from outside has increased, as have numbers of asylum seekers and refugees. Student migration fell during the pandemic and is now higher than in 2019.

Figure 3.3: For each of the following groups, do you think the number of immigrants coming to Britain nowadays has increased, reduced or is about the same over the last few years?



Base: all respondents (3004); fieldwork dates 19th July – 3rd August 2022

Our findings indicate that people's awareness of trends reflects the issues they are most concerned about, rather than the trends generating concern in themselves: those who voted to remain in the EU are more aware than leavers of the fall in migration from the EU; and Conservatives and Leave supporters are more aware of the increase in migration from outside of the EU. Migration sceptics are more likely to believe there have been increases in all categories, including of migrants from within the EU.

The low rates of awareness of trends in student migration among migration liberals and balancers reflects lower levels of concern generally about young people who come to the UK to study. In contrast, extensive media coverage has heightened public awareness of the rise in the number of asylum seekers and refugees, along with predictions that boat crossings will increase. Consequently, 78% of migration sceptics said they thought numbers have increased, compared to 49% of migration liberals and 64% of balancers (see Chapter 4).

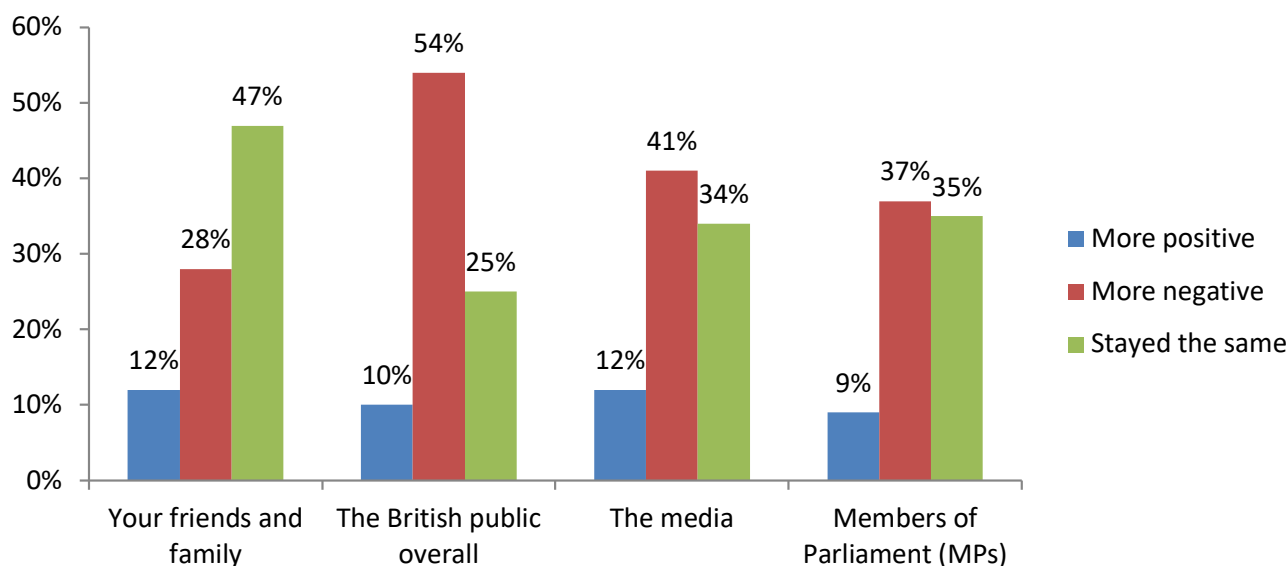
Control continues to be more important than numbers

People continually see it as more important that migration is controlled, whether or not numbers are reduced, than that the UK pursues a policy based on deterrence that keeps numbers low. Significantly more people (40%) see it is as important that the UK government has control over who can or can't come into the UK, whether or not that means numbers are significantly reduced, than the 27% of the public who prioritise deterring people from coming to the UK to keep numbers low. That is true, too, for Conservative supporters, 53% of whom prioritise controlling immigration, compared to 36% who would focus on deterrence.

People underestimate how others' attitudes have changed

Are people aware that the attitudes of others have also changed over time? Our findings indicate they are not. While public attitudes to immigration have grown warmer, most think they have become more negative. As Figure 3.4 shows, almost half of people say that the attitudes of their family and friends have stayed the same, and more than a quarter say they have become more negative. The media and politicians are also seen as having become more negative, although to a lesser extent than the general public.

Figure 3.4: Have views about the impact of immigration on Britain become more positive or more negative over the last few years, or stayed the same?



Base: all respondents (3004); fieldwork dates 19th July – 3rd August 2022

The extent to which people believe that attitudes of the public have become more negative is striking. More than half of people perceive a change in this direction, and only one in ten believe public attitudes have become more positive. Where different perceptions exist, they are largely by age rather than factors such as political allegiance, with younger people much less likely to believe the British public has become more negative.

Perspectives on trends in public attitudes vary, not surprisingly, by personal attitudes: three-quarters of migration sceptics believe others have become more negative, compared to half of balancers and liberals. However, only small proportions in these groups – 10% and 18% respectively – think that the attitudes of others have become more positive.

Public perspectives on the attitudes of friends, family and the wider public indicate widespread lack of awareness of how views have changed in the last six years. Awareness is similarly low among those who influence opinion, including politicians, journalists, commentators and news producers, who continue to work within an overall narrative of public opposition to immigration. It is also possible that people responded to this question with the issue of asylum seekers and refugees in mind rather than other, less contentious types of migration. It is even possible that people are aware of a greater public acceptance of migration for work but do not view this as a change in attitudes to immigration, but about the needs of the economy and public services. This may be especially so if they regard this kind of migration as temporary to meet pressing economic needs.

Many people feel that the media and politicians are becoming more negative towards immigration

Around four in ten people (41%) think that the media has become more negative on the topic of immigration and only 12% think it has become more positive. The proportion of people who think that MPs have become more negative about the impact of migration is roughly the same at 37%. Only 9% believe MPs have become more positive. Here there are quite sizeable differences by political allegiance: while around half of Labour supporters believe MPs have become more negative, a similar proportion of Conservative supporters believe they have stayed the same.

These views are likely to reflect the content of political debate on immigration, which has been recently dominated by issues relating to asylum seekers and refugees. Candidates for the Conservative leadership have focused on the Rwanda proposals, and Rishi Sunak had talked about tackling the issue of 'illegal immigration' at the time of our survey. Meanwhile, policy measures in relation to migration for work have focused on addressing skills shortages in sectors such as social care. They have attracted little political opposition or press attention. It is likely that, by focusing on the more contentious issue of asylum seekers and refugees, media and political discourse has inclined people to believe that the views of others are more negative than they are towards immigration in general.

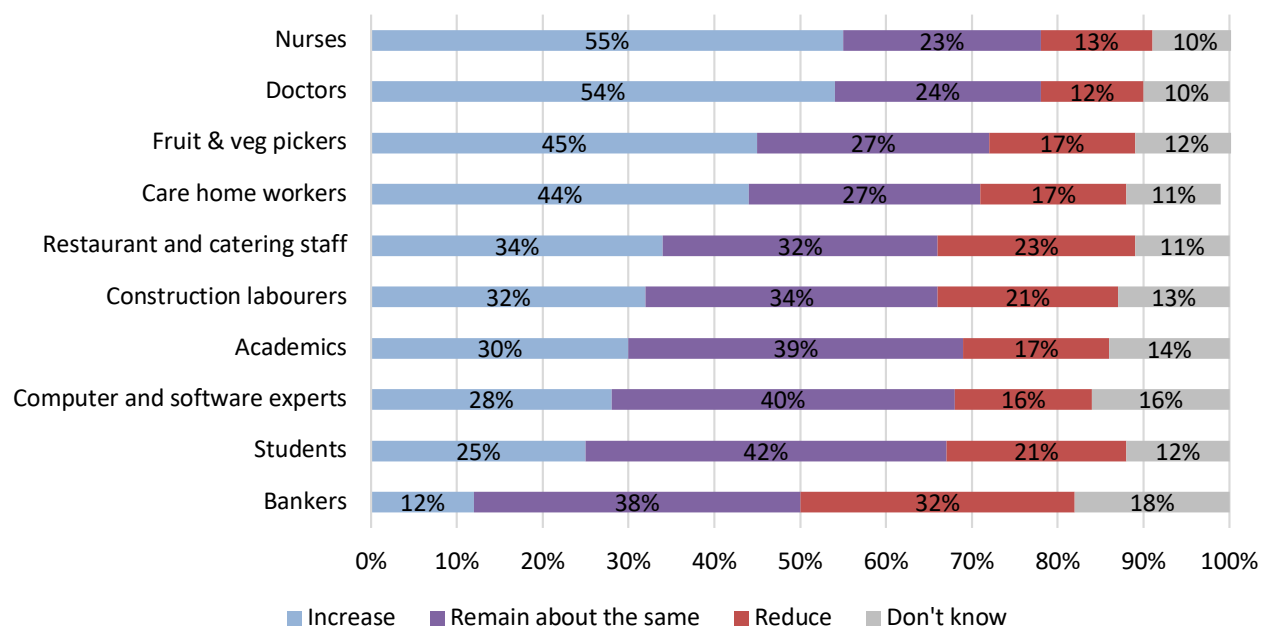
4. A pragmatic public: attitudes to migration for work

As we examine below, it is with regard to the economic impact of migration for work where attitudes have shifted most dramatically over the last decade.⁶

Our tracker surveys earlier in 2021 and 2022 found that three-quarters of the public support policies allowing recruitment of migrants to posts in key services such as health and social care and for temporary seasonal work in agriculture and hospitality. Two-thirds would support recruitment to any job where there are shortages.⁷

We have also measured attitudes to recruitment of migrants working in more specific occupations. As Figure 4.1 shows, the latest survey finds significant support (44-55%) for increasing the number of migrants in medicine, nursing, seasonal agriculture and social care. A third of people would prefer numbers to be increased for those working in restaurants and catering and construction. There is also more support for increasing the number of academics (30%) and IT experts (28%) than for reductions. However, for these occupations, and also for construction and for students, there is most support for keeping numbers the same – suggesting that perceived need is more important to the public than assessments of skill level.

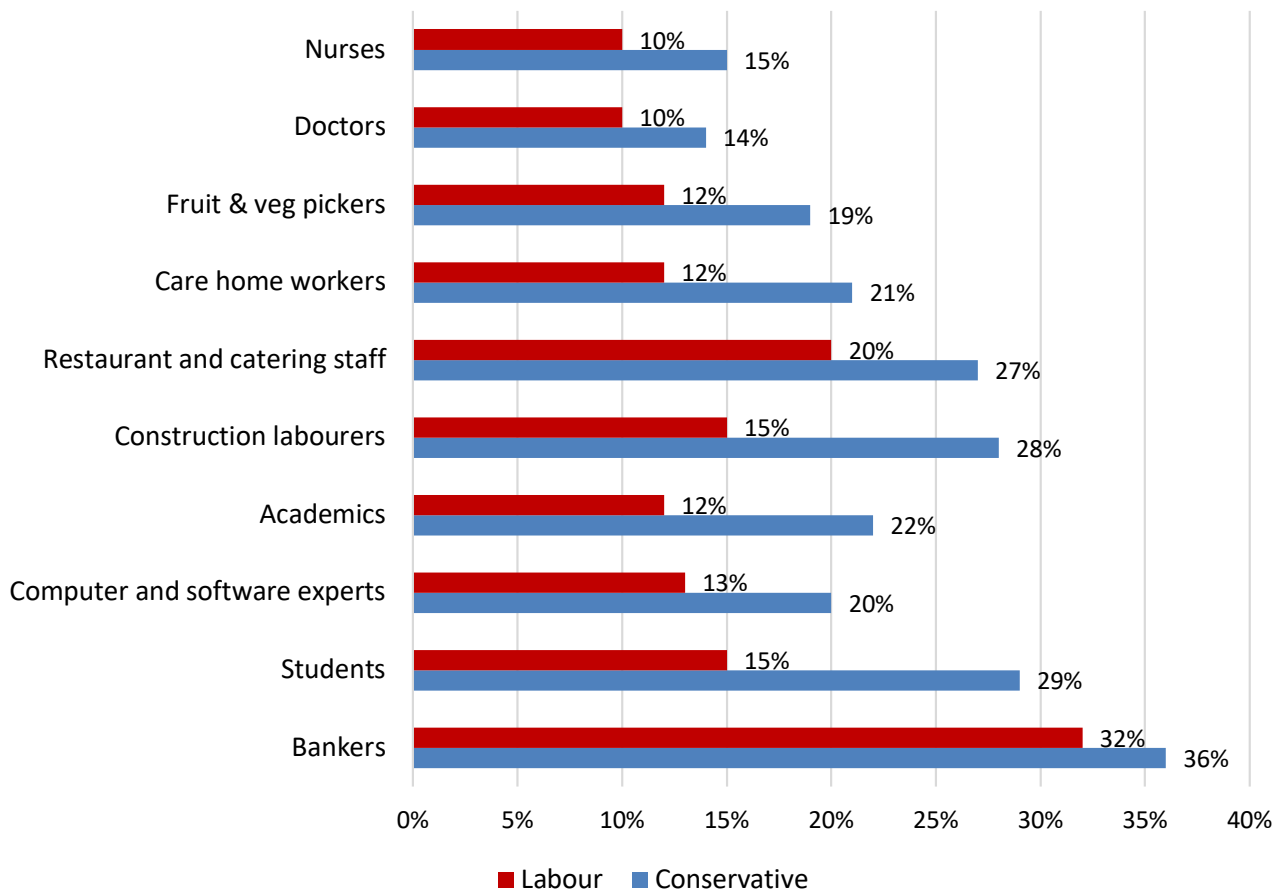
Figure 4.1: Would you prefer the following (from any country) to be increased, decreased or stay the same?



Base: all respondents (3004); fieldwork dates 19th July – 3rd August 2022

As Figure 4.2 below shows, Conservative supporters are slightly more supportive of reducing the number of migrants in these occupations than Labour supporters, but not by much. Only around 15% of Conservative supporters would like to reduce the number of migrant doctors and nurses; and only a fifth would reduce the number of migrant agricultural workers and care home staff.

Figure 4.2: By political party support: Would you prefer the number of immigrants (from any country) from each of the below groups coming to live in the UK to be reduced?



Base: respondents supporting Labour or Conservative parties (1694); fieldwork dates 19th July – 3rd August 2022

The Government has public permission to increase migration for work

The figures we have reported here, in particular regarding public support for increased migration of people coming to work in some sectors and occupations, reflect concerns about the economy and continuing labour shortages which impact on people’s daily lives. People do not only support policies that allow for highly skilled migrants. For lower skilled work, worries that migrants are taking jobs from British workers seem to have subsided. People are now much more likely than before to see migration as an opportunity to help with economic recovery, than as a threat.

This public permission for migration in some sectors may reflect skills and labour shortages that have emerged post-Brexit from the reduction in lower skilled migration from the EU. These shortages were exacerbated by further losses during the pandemic, and the initial exclusion of roles in many key sectors from the new immigration policy.

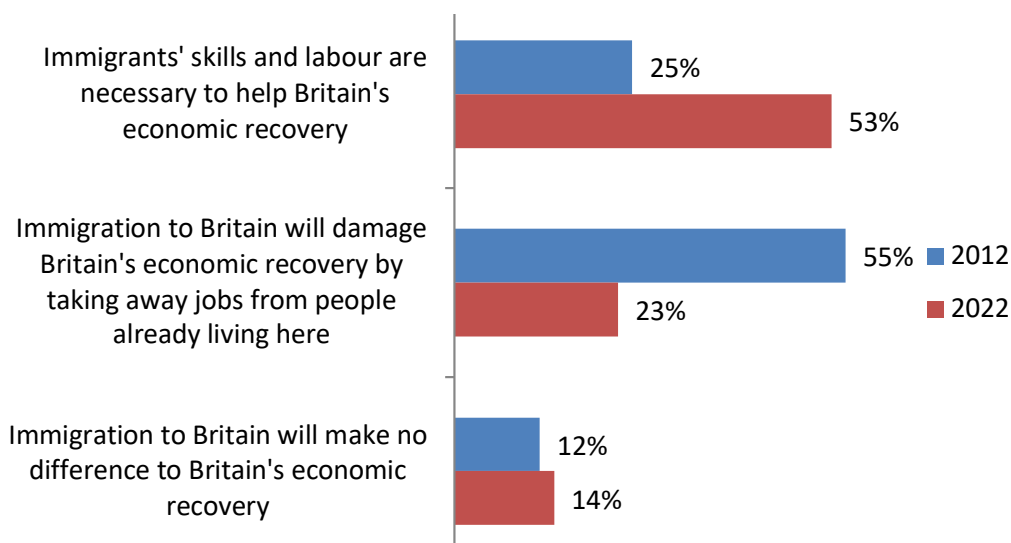
That almost half the public (45%) would support an increase in the number of migrant seasonal workers is likely to reflect worries about food supply and costs. People may also be aware that the restaurants they visit and health services they use are often short-staffed; and they may have experienced difficulty finding builders, plumbers and other contractors for house repairs.

A different formulation of this question was asked in previous waves of the tracker survey, when respondents were asked “Now that Britain has left the European Union, would you prefer the number of EU citizens from each of the below groups coming to live in the UK to be increased, reduced, or should it remain about the same?” This latest survey asks the question “Would you prefer the number of migrants (from any country) from each of the below groups coming to live in the UK to be increased, reduced, or should it remain about the same?”. We do not know if the different wording affects people’s responses, so the two sets of findings are not directly comparable. It is still worth noting, however, some significant differences in the responses when that first question was first asked in December 2018.

In 2018, 19% of the public said they would support an increase in seasonal workers from the EU. In 2022, 45% said they would support more seasonal workers from any country. Likewise in 2018 just 28% supported an increase in migrant care workers from the EU; in this 2022 survey 44% would support more care workers coming from any country. And in December 2018 only one in seven people favoured an increase in migrant recruitment to construction and restaurants from the EU. In 2022 one in three people said they would support increased recruitment to these roles from any country.

As Figure 4.3 shows, data from British Future’s recent Jubilee Britain report found a very significant 10-year shift towards people seeing migration as necessary to help economic recovery. Less than one in four believe that immigration damages economic recovery by taking jobs away from people already living here.⁸ This is a complete reversal of attitudes in 2012, when only one in four people agreed that migrants’ skills and labour were necessary to help the economy. At that time, more than half believed migration would damage economic recovery by taking jobs away from people already living in Britain.

Figure 4.3: Will migration help or hinder economic recovery?
Comparing 2012 and 2022



British Future, Jubilee Britain, May 2022 – survey by Focaldata

Labour shortages resulting from the pandemic and Brexit have played a part in these attitude shifts, highlighting migrants' role in key sectors such as delivery, food production, agriculture and social care. Our February 2022 tracker survey found a large majority of people agreeing that employers should be allowed to recruit from overseas to fill job vacancies, at all skill levels, if they cannot be filled within the UK.⁹ This was not the prevailing view in 2012. Unemployment rates may be a factor, currently only 3.8% compared to 8.2% in April 2012. It is possible that finding British workers was easier in 2012 than in 2022. Current vacancy figures indicate serious shortages in some sectors. The public therefore sees migration as a realistic and legitimate option.

Combined with the tracker findings, there is evidence of high levels of public support for migration in diverse sectors and occupations within an overall policy context of control. And there is little evidence that the public prefers only highly skilled migrants: the sectors and occupations where people prefer more rather than less migration include seasonal agricultural work and restaurant and catering staff. The Government has introduced flexibilities in seasonal agriculture and in health and social care, but more may be needed to fill vacancies.

Evidence of persistent shortages and economic and social need appear to be more important to the public than the skill level of migrants. The new, post-Brexit policies were designed purposefully to favour higher skilled migration, yet it is shortages in lower skilled sectors, resulting partly from these policies, that can also impact on people's lives. In the current circumstances at least, any move by the Government to make lower skilled and lower paid jobs where there are shortages eligible for work visas is likely to have public support.

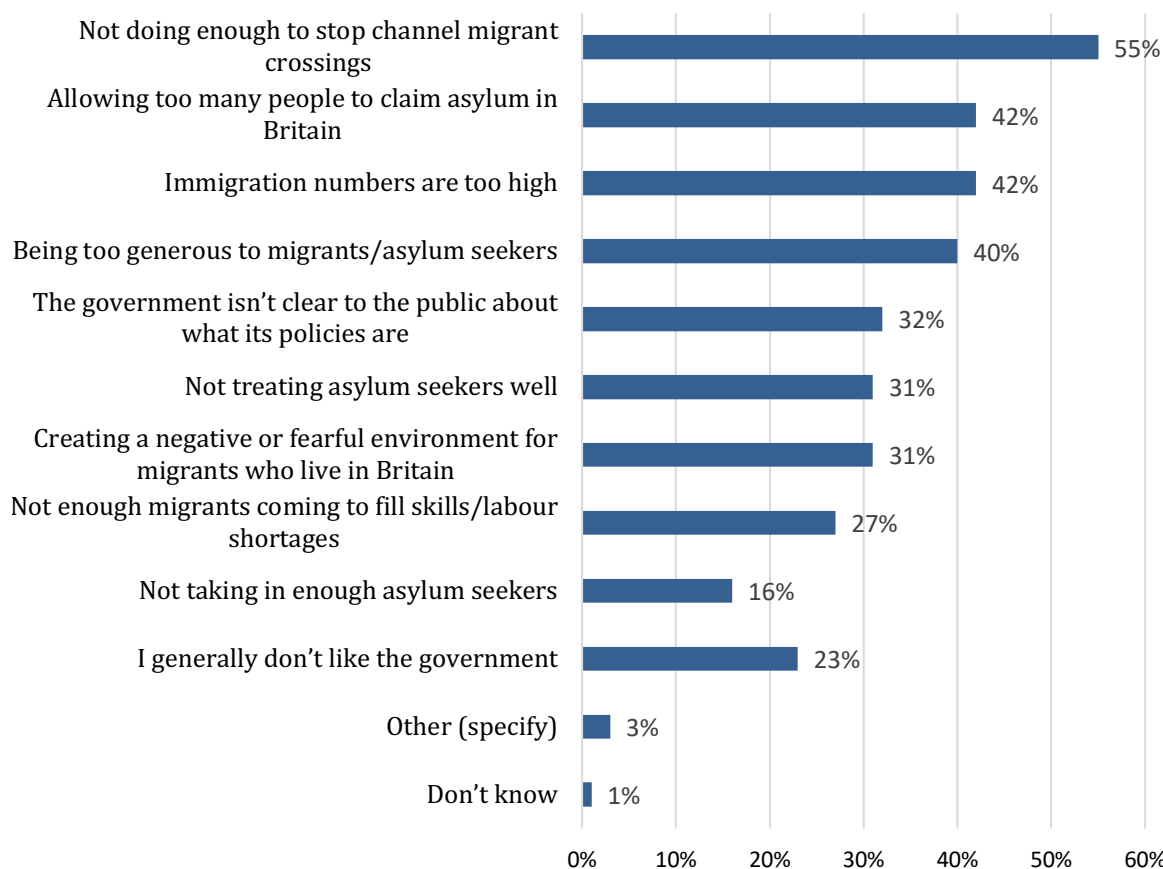
5. Concern and compassion: Refugees and asylum

While there is growing support for the positive impact that immigration for work and study can have on Britain's economy and society, attitudes on asylum and refugee protection are more polarised. The growing number of people making dangerous journeys across the Channel has a high public profile, and resembles nobody's idea of a well-managed asylum system. But there are deep divisions over the government's proposed response – the threat of deportation to Rwanda – and little confidence that the scheme will work.

Despite warmer public attitudes to immigration overall, only 1 in 10 people say they are satisfied with how the government is handling the issue. Six in ten (61%) say they are dissatisfied with the government's approach to immigration. Among those who say they are dissatisfied, many cite the government's response to irregular Channel crossings as the reason why.

Figure 5.1: Why are people dissatisfied with the government on immigration?

For which of the following reasons, if any, make you dissatisfied with the way the current government is dealing with immigration? Please pick all that apply.



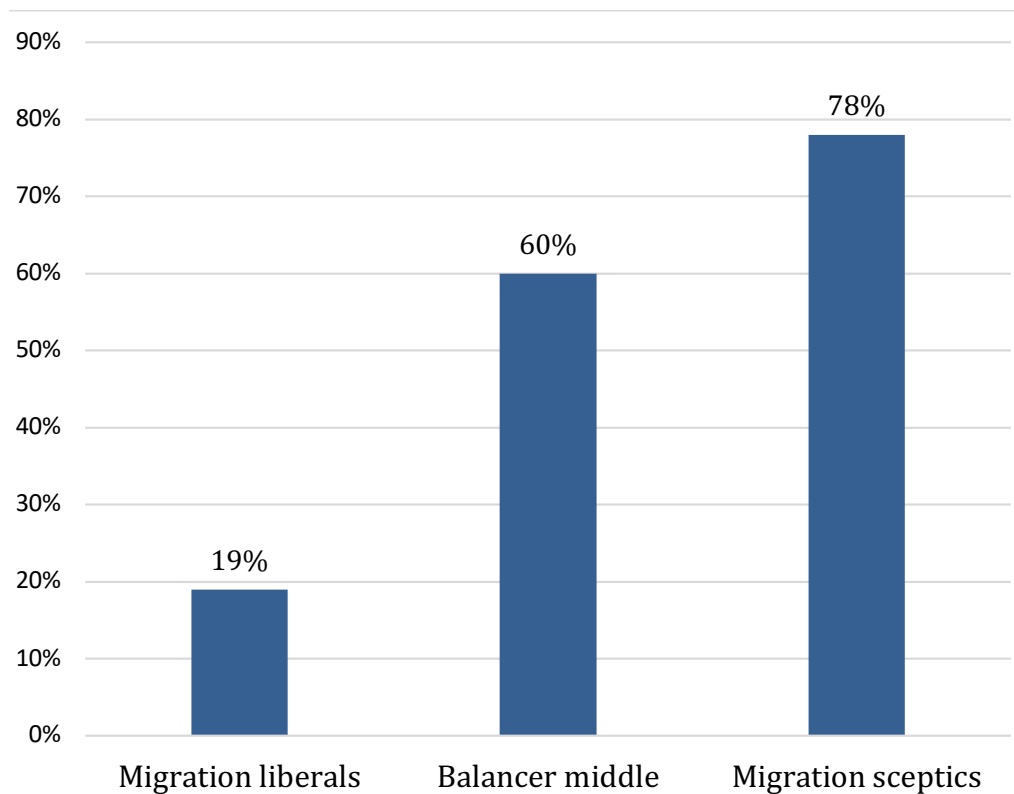
Base: 1,871 respondents who said they were dissatisfied with the way the government handles immigration. Fieldwork dates 19th July – 3rd August 2022

A closer look at the detail of these findings, however, shows that the picture is not quite so simple – and illustrates how asylum has become such a polarising issue. Although liberals, immigration sceptics and the ‘Balancer middle’ in between all share a sense of dissatisfaction with how the government is handling immigration, the similarity ends there. They are unhappy for very different reasons. Nearly eight in ten dissatisfied migration sceptics (78%) cite ‘not doing enough to stop channel migrant crossings’ as a reason. Yet the most common reason for liberals to feel dissatisfied is that the government is ‘not treating asylum seekers well,’ cited by 73% of this group – but just 5% of sceptics.

The ‘Balancer middle’, of whom 53% are dissatisfied with the government, are also most likely to cite boat crossings as a key reason, with 60% selecting it as a cause for their concern – reflecting the majority public’s desire for more to be done to tackle this issue effectively.

Figure 5.2: Concern about Channel crossing among different groups

For which of the following reasons, if any, make you dissatisfied with the way the current government is dealing with immigration? (Not doing enough to stop channel migrant crossings)



Base: 1,871 respondents who said they were dissatisfied with the way the government handles immigration. Fieldwork dates 19th July – 3rd August 2022

With much media attention on Channel crossings, as discussed earlier, most people feel that the number of people coming to seek refuge or asylum in Britain has increased over the last few years. This is correct: asylum applications have risen to 48,540 in 2021, from 26,547 in 2017, though they still remain significantly below

the 2002 high point of 84,132.¹⁰ Yet people's perception of the extent of this increase also differs significantly according to their attitudes to immigration: while 70% of migration sceptics feel that asylum applications have increased 'a lot', only 19% of liberals (and 36% of the balancer middle) feel the same. Even when it comes to basic reported statistics, people are coming to the argument from different places.

The majority of the public does, however, feel sympathetic towards the people making dangerous Channel crossings. Some 55% say they feel a great deal or fair amount of sympathy, compared to 39% who report feeling little or none. But images of overcrowded boats controlled by criminal gangs and reports of people drowning in the Channel make these boat crossings the embodiment of a lack of control over immigration and asylum. As discussed in chapter three, control is important: asked what is most important in Britain's approach to immigration, 40% of people prioritise the government having control over who can and can't come into the country – significantly more than the 27% who prioritise deterrence and keeping immigration numbers down.

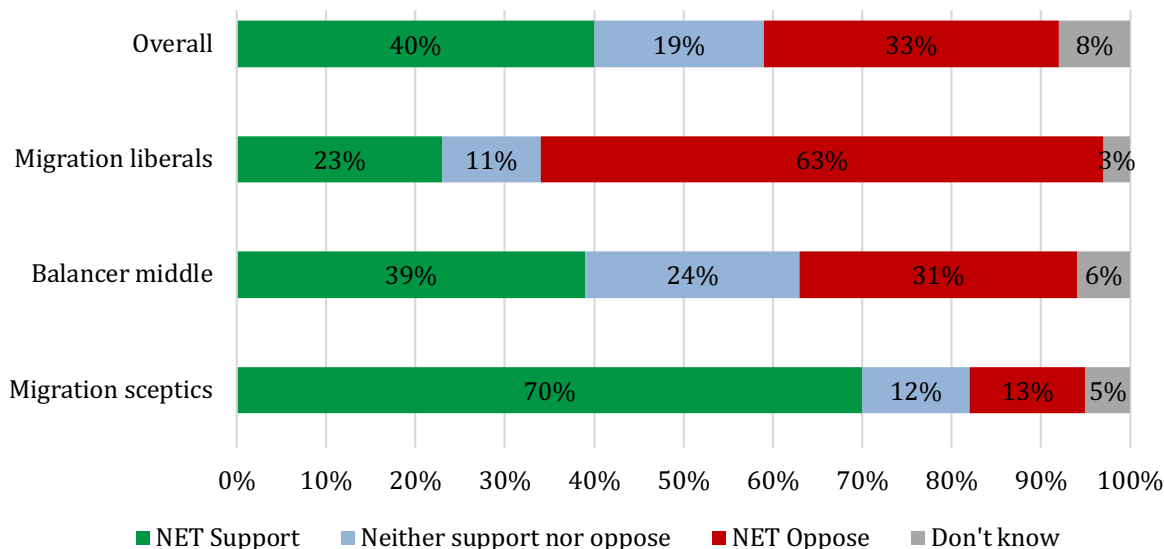
It is little surprise, then, that finding a policy response to Channel crossings has been a priority for government, particularly when the former Home Secretary Priti Patel sought to raise their salience, staking considerable political capital on a commitment to reduce the number of small boats arriving in the UK. After publicly floating and then dropping a series of headline-grabbing proposals – from towing boats back to France to wave machines – the government has signed an agreement with Rwanda to take an unspecified number of people from the UK.

Under the scheme, some people who come across the Channel to seek asylum, without prior permission, will be sent to Rwanda without the UK assessing their claim. They can then apply for asylum there through the Rwandan asylum system but will not be eligible to return to the UK.

The Rwanda scheme has been deeply polarising. Our Ipsos tracker research finds that a fifth of the public (21%) strongly support it and the same number (21%) strongly opposes it. Slightly more people are weakly supportive than weakly opposed, so the overall balance is 40% support and 33% opposed. This mirrors much of the public polling that has been conducted to test attitudes to the Rwanda scheme. In a series of different polls using a variety of formulations and wording, some of which portrayed the scheme in a strikingly positive light, the results have always been similar: there has never been a majority of public support for the scheme; and it has always been divisive, with similar numbers supportive and opposed.

Figure 5.3: What does the public think of the Rwanda scheme?

The UK Government has recently introduced a policy in which some people who enter the UK to seek asylum, by coming across the Channel without prior permission, will be sent to Rwanda without the UK assessing their claim. Those sent to Rwanda can apply for asylum there through the Rwandan asylum system and will not be eligible to return to the UK. On balance, to what extent, if at all, do you support or oppose this policy?



Base: all respondents (3004); fieldwork dates 19th July – 3rd August 2022

On the Rwanda scheme, our Ipsos tracker finds division by party politics and by immigration attitudes. Most Conservative voters support the Rwanda scheme (65% support, 15% opposed) while half of Labour supporters are opposed to it (51% opposed, 26% support). Migration sceptics are strongly in favour (by 70% to 13%) while liberals are opposed (by 63% to 23%). Opinion among the 'balancer middle' is more divided, with a narrow plurality in support of the scheme (by 39% to 31%). The public's response in Scotland is starkly different too, in line with Scotland's more liberal attitudes towards immigration in general: nearly half of Scots (47%) are opposed to the Rwanda scheme while only 28% are supportive.

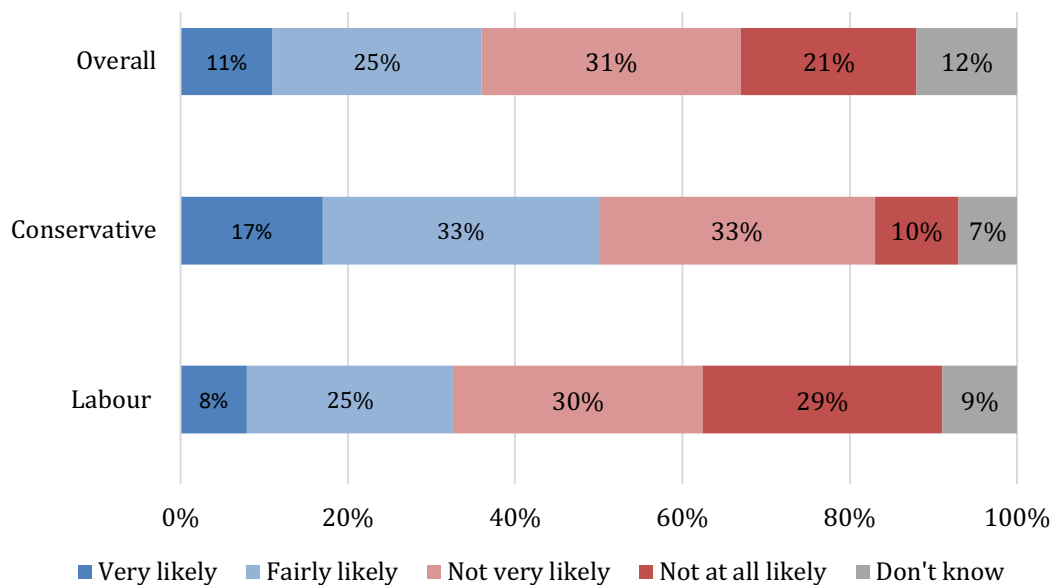
Most of the public wants an immigration and asylum system that balances control and compassion. Offering a choice between the two, however, proves to be divisive and polarising.

Setting aside the ethics and legalities of the Rwanda scheme, however, there is a greater degree of public agreement on whether the scheme will be effective and offer value for money. Most people think it probably will not.

Only around a third of people (36%) think the Rwanda plan will succeed in its stated aim of reducing the number of people who try to enter the UK without permission to seek asylum. A majority (52%) think it's unlikely to do so. Only half of Conservative supporters (50%) think the scheme will be a success in this respect, with 42% believing it will fail to reduce asylum applications. (Labour voters are more convinced it will fail, by 58% to 33%). Most of the public (53%) do not think it will deter 'genuine refugees' from applying.

Figure 5.4: Does the public think the Rwanda scheme will help reduce asylum applications?

The UK Government has recently introduced a policy in which some people who enter the UK to seek asylum, by coming across the Channel without prior permission, will be sent to Rwanda without the UK assessing their claim. Those sent to Rwanda can apply for asylum there through the Rwandan asylum system and will not be eligible to return to the UK. How likely or unlikely do you think it is that this policy will reduce the number of people who try to enter the UK, without permission, to seek asylum?

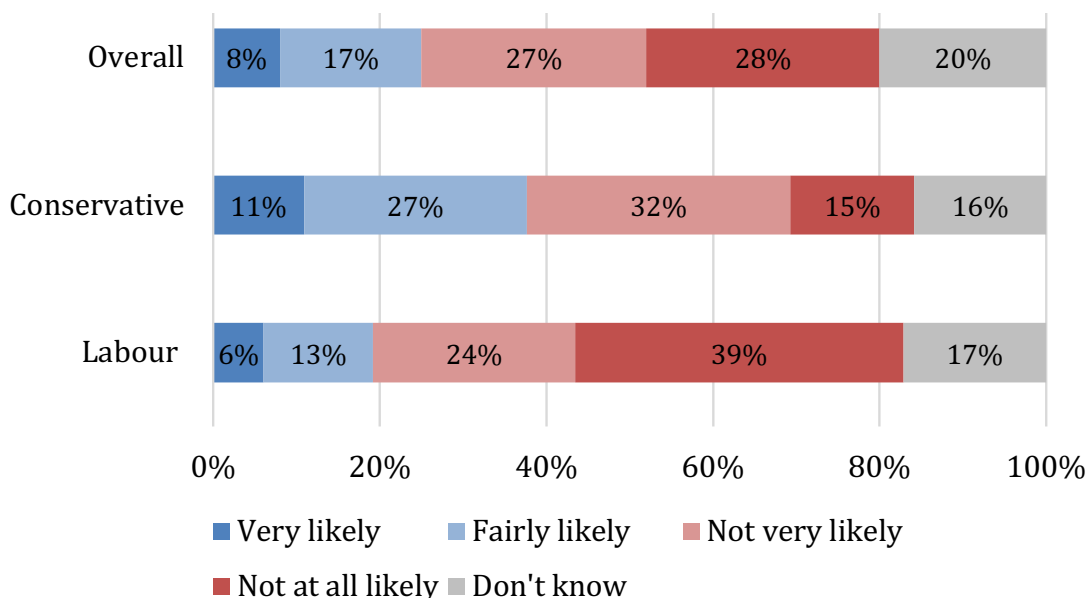


Base: all respondents (3004); fieldwork dates 19th July – 3rd August 2022

The cost of the Rwanda scheme has also been raised as a point of concern, notably by veteran Conservative backbencher David Davis MP. Only a quarter of the public (25%) think that the scheme is likely to provide value for money, while most (55%) feel it is unlikely to do so. More Conservative supporters, too, feel that the scheme is unlikely to be good value (46%) than think it will (38%).

Figure 5.5: Does the public think the Rwanda scheme will deliver value for money?

The UK Government has recently introduced a policy in which some people who enter the UK to seek asylum, by coming across the Channel without prior permission, will be sent to Rwanda without the UK assessing their claim. Those sent to Rwanda can apply for asylum there through the Rwandan asylum system and will not be eligible to return to the UK. **How likely or unlikely do you think it is that this policy will provide value for money?**



Base: all respondents (3004); fieldwork dates 19th July – 3rd August 2022

The public is clearly concerned about Channel crossings and is looking to the government to do something about them. There is no evidence, however, that they are convinced that the Rwanda scheme is the answer. To date there have been no successful deportations at all, with the High Court due to hear a Judicial Review later this month to determine the legality of the scheme.

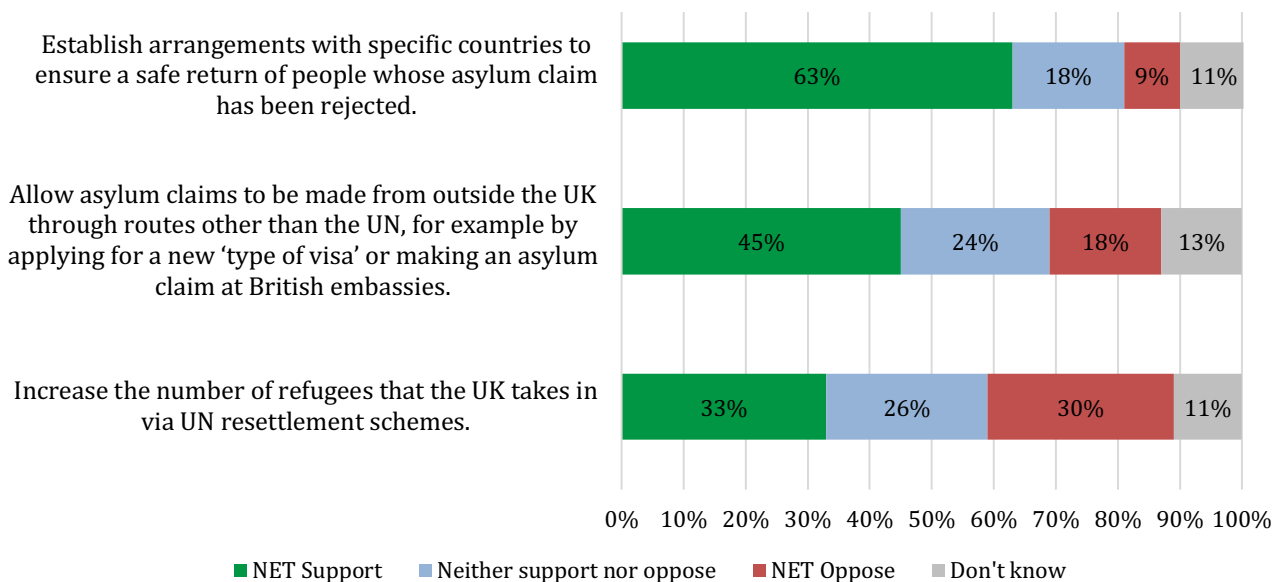
Some of the Rwanda scheme's supporters have challenged opponents to put forward their own constructive proposals for reducing the number of dangerous boat crossings, rather than critiquing the government's plans. The challenge of tackling Channel crossings is complex and there is unlikely to be one 'silver bullet' fix. We tested three possible reforms to UK asylum policy to assess whether they would secure public support.

Opening more safe routes through which people can find refuge in the UK, for example by expanding resettlement schemes, would be one way to reduce demand for unsafe crossings. The public are divided on this idea, however: a third of people are supportive of increasing the number of refugees that the UK takes in via UN resettlement schemes (33%) and just under a third opposed (30%). More popular, with 45% support, would be offering alternative ways for people to make a UK asylum application from outside the country, other than through the UN – for example with a new visa, or by allowing applications at some embassies. Opposition to this idea is not particularly strong, at 18%.

Enabling the safe return of more people whose asylum claim has been rejected, by securing new arrangements with specific countries, is the most popular of the policy proposals, supported by six in ten people (63%) and opposed by around one in ten (9%). Encouraging more safe returns would be good for the credibility of the asylum system and could, in theory, have a longer-term impact of discouraging those without a viable asylum claim. It may not have an immediate impact on Channel crossings – but it does suggest that the public would support more cross-border cooperation between the UK and its neighbours, which some experts suggest could be the most effective way to reduce boat crossings over time.

Figure 5.6: Public attitudes to other policy responses on asylum and refugees

To what extent would you support or oppose each of the following measures relating to asylum seekers in the UK?



Base: all respondents (3004); fieldwork dates 19th July – 3rd August 2022

These new findings confirm that a debate about ‘control versus compassion’ will produce a deadlocked stand-off, with around a third of the public on each side of a polarised argument.

We asked people where they stood on the ‘unintended consequences’ of two opposing, hypothetical approaches to asylum: one which prioritised keeping out those without a genuine claim, even if it excluded some who warranted protection; or one which prioritised protecting all those who needed it, even if it meant some without a legitimate claim being admitted. Respondents were split, with 4 in 10 (42%) choosing tighter control and a third (34%) choosing greater compassion. A further quarter couldn’t choose either of these options. It is likely that many will have preferred a system that is able to blend the two.

There is less polarisation over how we should treat people once they are here. Some 44% of the public would support a government ‘welcoming programme’ to help people integrate into UK society,

with just 17% opposed. And almost one in four people (24% of GB adults) said they would be interested in taking part in welcoming activities to help people settle in the UK. This amounts to nearly 13 million people who would be interested in getting involved.

The key to securing the balancer majority on refugee issues is not to increase the temperature of the debate, especially if headlines over-promise and under-deliver – but to marry control, compassion, and competence – and a commitment to help those here in the UK to settle and contribute to our shared society.

6. Conclusion: Immigration after Boris – a new political landscape?

The change of Prime Minister and Home Secretary this autumn offers a chance to take stock of the major recent changes on immigration and what they mean for future policy – for the new Government under Liz Truss and beyond. How far will changing public attitudes towards immigration influence how immigration features in the politics and policy arguments at the next General Election?

The Boris Johnson Legacy: “Control, Don’t Reduce”

Boris Johnson was only Prime Minister for three years – yet his governments made some of the most significant changes to the immigration system for four decades. Resolving the Brexit stalemate and leaving the European Union meant the end of freedom of movement between Britain and the European Union. A new points-based system meant immigration from within and beyond Europe would be subject to similar rules.

Johnson’s overall approach to immigration could be summed up in three words: “Control, not reduce”.

The end of free movement brought significant new restrictions for migration from the EU. If the government’s priority had been to reduce the numbers, one option would have been to extend the existing non-EU migration rules to the EU too. Instead, the Johnson government chose to significantly relax the policy framework that the May government had set out in its 2018 immigration white paper. It preferred a more pragmatic concept of skilled work: a salary threshold for visas at £25,600 rather than £30,000 would cover many more mid-range jobs, with the starting salary quietly set at £20,500 for workers aged under 25.¹¹

The government also quietly aligned the salary threshold for settlement, previously £38,000, with those for visas, so that people who come to work under the points-based system can become permanent residents and citizens once they have been here for six years.¹²

An NHS visa saw increased migration for NHS jobs, particularly from India and the Philippines. As this Ipsos tracker shows, migration for the NHS is, for most of the public, the paradigm example of the benefits of migration. This perception was strengthened by the Covid pandemic.

One of the most significant recent sources of immigration has been the growth in the number of international students. Johnson’s government made it easier to stay and work in Britain for two

years after graduating, which has made studying in Britain more attractive to fee-paying students considering the UK against competitors like Canada, Australia and the US. Yet student migration has long enjoyed broad political and public support – and the least public interest in reductions. The dominant public intuition is that the arrival of international students is not really an ‘immigration’ issue: when they stay on and work in the UK, that is more clearly about immigration. One public view is ‘why send those skills away?’ – with a preference for recent international graduates at UK universities staying to help UK firms compete with Indian or Chinese competitors, rather than helping those firms compete with the UK.¹³

Perhaps the biggest single post-Brexit migration policy choice was the new BN(O) visa for people coming to the UK from Hong Kong. No MP has yet broken with the near-unanimous cross-party consensus in the House of Commons on this policy. This reflects the range of overlapping reasons for support: a robust response to China’s security crackdown and breach of the 1997 agreement; a sense of Britain’s responsibility for British overseas passport holders; and a belief that Hong Kongers can make a significant positive contribution to the UK economy and society. Less anticipated sources of further immigration were the crises in Afghanistan and Ukraine, where the design of the Homes for Ukraine scheme meant that the large number of new arrivals was a direct result of pressure from the public to get more refugees admitted to the UK.

The pandemic disrupted immigration significantly. Migration statistics are now estimated differently and are much more tentative, with no accurate data on who left during the pandemic. In its first year, net migration was almost certainly negative. Ironically, the impossible target could be met in extraordinary circumstances. EU immigration fell, but the more liberal non-EU policy saw a rapid recovery in migration from outside the European Union. The closure of normal travel routes saw a dramatic shift towards Channel Crossings by those seeking asylum.

The overall impact of Boris Johnson’s ‘control not reduce’ legacy is that immigration remains high and is rising rather than falling. It is back to pre-pandemic levels, in all probability somewhat higher in 2022 than it was in 2019 or 2016. This sustained level of high immigration is the predictable outcome of government policy choices. The positive shifts in attitudes since the referendum offer compelling proof that for most of the public, ‘control’ did not necessarily mean ‘reduce’ – and that controls were more important to most people.

Yet the Johnson government, like the Vote Leave campaign he had led in 2016, did not make a sustained public case for its own ‘control, not reduce’ policy. Instead, it had mixed messages when it came to immigration numbers. On his first day in office as Prime Minister, Johnson ditched the government’s net migration target, to reduce net migration to the tens of thousands. What had once

been a flagship target had become a political millstone. Having championed the target for almost a decade as Home Secretary and then Prime Minister, Theresa May left office with net migration at 272,000. Yet a late addition to the 2019 Conservative manifesto promised that “overall numbers would fall” but without being given much, if any, priority in the policy choices made. This has created tensions within government. The former Home Secretary Priti Patel reportedly compiled a 15-page dossier of colleagues who had privately asked her to soften the immigration system. The Sunday Times reported that “it spans practically the entire Cabinet”.

The focus of immigration politics has switched to the deep clash over asylum policy in general, and the Rwanda deportation plan in particular. The ‘control’ dividend certainly does not apply to dangerous Channel crossings, which are nobody’s idea of a well-managed asylum system, while the government’s appetite to pick fights with ‘left-wing lawyers’, Bishops and refugee groups further polarises opinion along party lines.

The new party politics of immigration: clash and consensus?

The deep clash over the Rwanda policy means that the quiet consensus on immigration for work and study has not been much noticed. Labour accepted the principle of the new points-based system, having accepted that Brexit means the end of EU free movement. The Conservative government used new controls to pursue a liberal agenda for non-EU migration. At the present moment it is difficult to identify big policy disagreements between the major parties over who gets a visa to come and study or work in Britain.

The major parties have different electoral coalitions. The Conservatives have a coalition of balancers and strong sceptics, while Labour more often needs to bridge the balancer middle with those with more liberal views.

In British Future’s segmentation of Conservative supporters, almost a third (31%) are strong sceptics who give migration a score of 3 out of 10 or below and favour restrictions on immigration in principle and often in practice too. Half (53%) are in the ‘balancer middle’, giving an overall score for migration of between 4 and 7 out of 10 and recognising a mixture of pressures and gains, reflected in pragmatic views of different migration flows. Some 13% of the Conservatives are in the ‘migration liberal’ segment, rating the contribution of immigration at least at 8 out of 10 and feeling more concerned about policy being too restrictive than too loose.

The Conservatives face something of a dilemma. Some 61% of Conservatives say they do want to see overall numbers reduced, with four out of ten favouring large reductions in overall numbers. Yet most Conservative reducers turn out to apply the principle very selectively: only one in five would reduce the number of seasonal fruit-pickers (19%) or social care workers (21%). A third of

Conservatives (36%) are willing to reduce the number of bankers who come to Britain, while just under a third would reduce the number of students (29%), construction workers (28%) or restaurant staff (27%).

On numbers, 29% of Labour supporters want immigration reduced overall (13% by a lot) with two-thirds preferring either current levels of immigration (32%) or for immigration to increase further (32%). The Labour vote contains a third (34%) which is firmly liberal, often seeing current policy as too tight; half (49%) from the balancer middle; and 13% of Labour supporters who are strongly sceptical (giving immigration a score of 0-3 out of 10). Labour therefore also faces less political cross-pressure than the Conservatives on issues of immigration levels. It can focus on managing pressures effectively, balancing migration with domestic training and skills and promoting integration, citizenship and welcoming – speaking to balancers and to liberal voters keen to see the opposition take a more welcoming approach on migration and refugee issues in particular.

What next? Three options for the new government on immigration

Option one: Commit to reduced numbers, and tighten controls to deliver reductions

Liz Truss's government could commit to reducing overall levels of immigration. It may come under pressure to do so, from some backbenchers, if there is a fear in Westminster that sustained migration must automatically lead to a backlash, on the assumption that reducing numbers was what mattered most to the voters. A government that committed to reducing overall levels of immigration – and reflected that in its policy choices – would logically have to reverse some of the specific policy changes introduced by the Johnson government. Yet three of the decisions that have made some of the most significant contributions seem especially unlikely to be reversed.

It is highly unlikely that there would be support inside government or in the Commons for curtailing the BN(O) visa scheme for Hong Kongers – under which an estimated 100,000 more people may come to the UK each year than if the scheme had not been implemented. Liz Truss has previously been a champion of the policy and Suella Braverman praised the BN(O) scheme in her conference speech. Curbing migration of healthcare workers to fill NHS staff shortages looks similarly unlikely, with Health Secretary and Deputy PM Therese Coffey recently telling the Daily Telegraph: “I just want to make sure we’ve got the right number of people. I don’t mind if they are coming from abroad or are home-schooled here.”¹⁴ And while the Home Secretary has drawn attention to international students (and their dependents) as a significant flow of migration, their popularity with the public

– and the estimated £25 billion they contribute to the economy each year¹⁵– would seem to make significant cuts unlikely for a government focused on economic growth.

What the Ipsos data demonstrates is that any immigration strategy seeking to reduce overall numbers significantly must mean choosing to curb flows of future migration for sectors that would, in themselves, have broad public consent. There is no realistic route to significantly lower overall numbers without cutting relatively popular forms of migration for work and study.

Option two: make the case for exceptions, on a case-by-case basis

A second option would be continuity, in which the government continues to talk about its general preference for reduced immigration, but without making that a significant priority in its policy choices, while being willing to over-ride it for pragmatic reasons in specific cases.

This appears to be the initial approach of the Truss government. Truss's leadership campaign pledged to double the number of short-term agriculture visas. The Health Secretary is proposing a major international recruitment drive for health and social care workers to deal with short-term pressures. The Ipsos data shows broad public permission for pragmatism on these specific choices. Yet at the same time Home Secretary Suella Braverman has spoken publicly of her aspiration to reduce annual net migration to within the 'tens of thousands' target set by David Cameron.¹⁶

Unless the government also proposes countervailing curbs on current student and economic visa rules, the foreseeable consequence is that overall migration will be more likely to rise than to fall (though a sustained economic recession may dampen the rate of increase). So the political downside of this approach is that the government continues to ask to be judged by a measure – reducing overall numbers – that it does not intend to deliver, even when its actual policy choices broadly reflect public opinion. It also currently has no clear framework for balancing short-term migration to fill skills gaps with medium and longer-term training and recruitment plans. However, inertia may mean that continuing to accept this contradiction between the objectives and policy is the path of least resistance.

Option three: Control, don't reduce: seek to entrench consent for migration to Britain

Several different arguments can still be made for reducing immigration but the claim to do so in the name of a majority of the public no longer holds. A smaller proportion of the public favours reductions, and those that do are more selective about where to apply them. Future governments might respond to the shift in

public attitudes with a much greater focus on managing migration rather than reducing it. Given that only 29% of Labour voters now favour reductions in overall numbers, while 64% do not, this could be the focus of a future Labour-led administration.

There is less heat in the debate about migration for study and work than there has ever been. Policy-makers can seek to reinforce this by increasing public voice – especially that of the ‘balancer’ middle which can be crowded out of public and social media debate. A budget-style annual migration day in Parliament, preceded by extensive engagement across nations and regions, could foreground a commitment to managing migration fairly.

While the public is increasingly pragmatic about migration to fill labour force gaps, public policy could insist employers using short-term labour, for example in agriculture, follow best employment practice and take responsibility for housing impacts. Those recruiting to jobs on shortage occupation lists should face mandatory reporting of increased investment in domestic training.

There should be more focus, too, on integration and citizenship. A review of UK citizenship policy could actively encourage citizenship for those settling in the UK long-term, by reviewing the processes and costs of citizenship, and championing its benefits for those settling in the UK.

Control and compassion? Can the clash over asylum be resolved?

Cynically, the politics of the Rwanda issue may work rather better for the Government while there is a legal stand-off. This keeps the argument at the level of principle - about whether or not the Government is right to try to do *something*. If legal permission to proceed is secured, the weaknesses of the government’s policy will become clearer.

The main argument of principle against the scheme is that it deports people without hearing their case – when most would be classed as genuine refugees if that case were considered by the UK. Some 76% of asylum applicants to the UK last year were granted status: this rose to 97-98% for applications from Afghanistan and Syria.¹⁷

The practical arguments against the scheme are that it is both costly and will make little difference – so it is a distraction from cooperation with European countries, on border control and safe returns, or reforms towards more effective decision-making for those in the UK system.

Rwanda has capacity to take around 200 people. The rise in numbers of those making Channel crossings, since the policy was announced, demonstrate why deporting 1-2% of asylum seekers to Africa has little realistic prospect of achieving the deterrent effect that is the central rationale for the policy. While the Truss government may seek to expand that and hopes to persuade

Zambia to take a similar deal, marginal increases in the scale of deportations will make little difference.

Since Brexit, the UK government has declared 17,000 people inadmissible for asylum in the UK before then admitting 99% of them into the UK asylum system.¹⁸ It has a responsibility to develop a workable policy. Its opponents, in politics and civic society, also need to demonstrate further that they can combine Britain's international obligations under the Refugee Convention with an orderly, effective and humane asylum system. With The Times now reporting that "Ministers are resigned to the prospect of being prevented by legal challenges from implementing this policy before the next general election,"¹⁹ the future of the Rwanda scheme may now depend on the outcome of the next General Election. A re-elected Conservative government would be likely to pursue the Rwanda policy. The Labour opposition have said that they would drop it, and develop an alternative. What are the policy options?

Cooperation with governments in Europe and beyond is needed to tackle people smuggling, and to return those whose claims fail. The key to securing the balancer majority on refugee issues is not to increase the temperature of the debate, but to invest the energy and public resource into an asylum system that offers safe routes to those with a reason to claim in the UK, that makes fair decisions within six months, and which prioritises international agreements, in Europe and beyond, to return those whose claims fail, where it is safe to do so. An increasing amount of detailed work is now being done to flesh out these alternatives and to build a broader civic coalition around them. These include reports this year from the Tony Blair Institute²⁰ and 'A British National Refugee Strategy', authored by Conservative peer Baroness Philippa Stroud with Alexander Betts, Will Somerville and Refugee Council CEO Enver Solomon.²¹

The polarised debate about asylum requires workable responses that combine control and compassion. But there is also more that we can do once people are granted status to stay in the UK, by increasing their social contact with the local communities they join. The appetite for hosting Ukrainian refugees is part of a broader interest in welcoming which includes those who do not have the capacity and space to host someone in their home. Millions of Britons say they would take part in other activities such as English language conversation clubs, support with work skills and social events that promote mixing between migrants and 'welcomers'.²² Because the appetite to engage in practical welcoming extends across political tribes – and from cities, towns and villages – it has significant long-term potential to help to defuse and depolarise the public debate about immigration.

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