How we can actually stop the boats

Bringing control and compassion back to the UK asylum system

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About British Future:

British Future is an independent, non-partisan think tank engaging people's hopes and fears about integration and migration, identity and race, so that we share a confident and welcoming Britain, inclusive and fair to all.

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1. Introduction: How to stop the boats?

The rising number of small boats crossing the Channel, alongside the linked public concern over asylum hotels, is the most pressing political issue for Keir Starmer's government. Immigration and asylum have risen to the top of the list of voters' concerns. Fail to come up with a convincing and effective response by the time of the next election and Labour may struggle to get a hearing on the issues it would rather talk about. Local elections next May, in which Reform UK are expected to secure slews of new seats on an immigration platform, may offer a taste of what's to come.

The prospects of a way out may appear gloomy. Successive governments have now spent six years not stopping the boats. Since the general election a raft of policies, expenditure and new appointments to support the 'Smash the gangs' strategy have had some impacts, including increased asylum removals. Yet they have not reduced the numbers of Channel crossings, nor changed the public perception that governments have failed to get a grip. The appeal of populism's simple slogans grows stronger when nothing the other parties do seems to make any difference.

Yet the question of how to significantly reduce irregular Channel crossings – and in so doing, shore up support for the UK's role protecting refugees – is not insurmountable. There is an approach that can work – which has, in fact, been proven to work. It is one that the public would support. It aligns with the views and values of both the UK and Starmer's Labour Party. And what is more, the government has already taken some of the critical first steps towards putting it into practice.

A successful approach to Channel crossings needs to combine control and compassion. What that means in practice is returning to France the vast majority of those who arrive without permission in small boats, while at the same time welcoming those with the right to claim asylum via an expanded, regularised route to the UK.

The public understands the logic of this approach. It is not fair to accuse people seeking protection of queue-jumping when, as is currently the case, there is effectively no queue to join. By the same token, once a safe way to seek permanent protection is provided, it is reasonable to ask asylum-seekers to join the line, from a place of safety, within a managed system of international cooperation where each country does its bit to protect refugees.

These principles underpin the new 'one in, one out' deal between the UK and France. The potential of this scheme, at scale, to break the deadlock has been underappreciated. Responses have understandably questioned how much difference the pilot can make, by initially processing around 50 returns and admissions to Britain each week. That translates to around a 1 in 17 chance of arrivals this year being returned. This is a valid critique – but it indicates how to resolve it too. If the pilot can be expanded ten-fold, it would make returns more likely than not. At twenty times

the scale, it would have the potential to close down the irregular route as a viable way to claim asylum in Britain.

That is how a government could actually stop the boats.

Recent evidence from the US shows just how effective such a 'routes and returns' policy can be. It is a little-known fact that Joe Biden's US administration reduced illegal border crossings from Mexico by 77 % between December 2023 and August 2024.[1] It was achieved through a three-pronged approach that is very similar to the UK-France pilot. Diplomatic efforts to secure strong cooperation agreements with neighbouring countries through which migrants are travelling; a tough approach to irregular border crossings, significantly reducing the chance of successfully claiming asylum for those arriving without permission; and a substantial official scheme through which people could apply to come to the country.

The result in the US was that it simply wasn't worth the expense and the risk of paying the smugglers anymore, undermining their business model entirely. If you used them to try and cross the border, your chances of getting to the US and staying there were slim. But if you signed up to the official route and joined the queue, in time you had a chance to enter the country legally.

The US policy changed the whole dynamic of cross-border migration. It didn't just swap illegal border crossings for legal migration: it killed off the people smugglers' business model. That led to a significant reduction in the overall number of people entering the US via its southern border.

The British and American contexts are not identical but there are clear similarities and lessons for UK policy. A 'routes and returns' deal can work and has been shown to work. Striking an expanded deal with our neighbour, returning to France those who arrive without permission and offering a controlled, official route to come and apply for asylum in the UK, can break the business model of the smuggling gangs. At the right scale, a routes and returns scheme could reduce Channel crossings by 75%.

This kind of approach chimes with UK public opinion. Most people are concerned about Channel crossings. They would like their government to exert greater control over who can and cannot enter the country to claim asylum. But they do not want to rip up the treaties and stop doing our bit to help people fleeing war and persecution. They just want it to be done through a controlled, orderly and secure system. Public attitudes research for this report shows that expanding the pilot to a scale that could work has a striking ability to reach across the divide of what has seemed the most intractable and polarised of political debates.

The lessons from America offer some hope for Keir Starmer's government, but some warnings too. Implementing the policy at scale matters: a smaller 2023 US pilot scheme produced poor results, and only when it was scaled up in 2024 did irregular border crossings plummet. Starmer needs to be bold if he wants results.

He also needs to get the politics right, as well as the policy. The 2024 success of Biden's Democrats in reducing border crossings didn't help them in the Presidential election. By the time they made things work, it was too late – three years of inaction and ducking the question had given Donald Trump all the time he needed to own the issue and frame the Democrats as the party of open borders. Starmer must learn from that mistake and act decisively.

As the 75th anniversary of the Refugee Convention approaches next year, we cannot pretend that the global context hasn't changed since 1951. Technological advances have transformed international travel and communications. More people are on the move. Some argue that it is time to quit and give up on the post-war international system of refugee protection altogether. But the millions of lives undoubtedly saved since the 1950s are a compelling argument not to give up. Instead, we can adapt and maintain our commitment to protect those most in need, while respecting the public desire for control.

About the authors and this publication

This publication is authored by **Sunder Katwala** and **Frank Sharry** of British Future. Sunder Katwala is Director of British Future and a leading public voice on UK immigration policy and politics. Frank Sharry is one of the US's leading immigration strategists. He was lead advisor on immigration policy to the Kamala Harris Presidential campaign. Over the last 30 years he has led US migration NGOs America's Voice and the National Immigration Forum in Washington DC.

The report sets out the case for a 'routes and returns' asylum deal with France, at scale, to bring back control to the asylum system and manage Channel crossings. It also examines the policy approaches to date of UK governments in response to small boat crossings, and where they failed. It analyses the parallel experience of the Biden administration in the US, which met with far greater success, and assesses what lessons can be taken for the policy and politics of asylum in the UK.

It also examines public opinion on asylum through analysis of previously unpublished findings on asylum, extracted from the new Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker. The full findings of the tracker will be published in November, and we are grateful to Ipsos for working with us to release this sub-section of their research.

Ipsos interviewed a representative sample of 3,003 adults aged 18+ across Great Britain. The question on support for the UK deal with France was split-sampled, with 1,501 asked the version with the maximum cap set at 50,000, and 1,502 asked the version where no maximum to the cap was mentioned. Polling was conducted online between 16 June-2 July 2025. Data are weighted to match the profile of the population. All polls are subject to a wide range of potential sources of error.

The tracker enables us to examine how responses to policy questions vary by people's broader perspectives on immigration. To assess this we ask 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). We use these scores to segment people into three groups: 'Migration Sceptics', who feel less positive about immigration and make up around 3 in 10 people; 'Migration Liberals', around a fifth of the public; and the larger 'Balancer Middle' group, who sit somewhere in between. These classifications are used to shed light on public attitudes to more detailed areas of policy in Chapter 3.

2. How not to stop the boats: lessons from failure and frustration

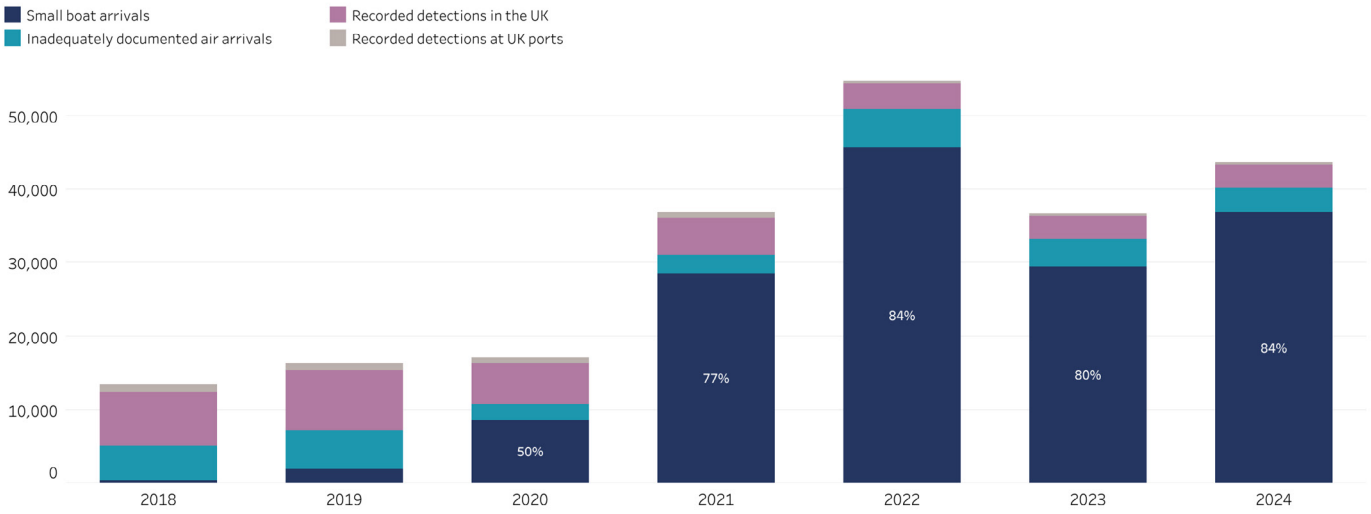
Ever since significant numbers of people were first recorded crossing the Channel to claim asylum in 2018, governments have loudly proclaimed their commitment to stopping these dangerous journeys in small boats.

It was six years ago that Home Secretary Priti Patel pledged, in September 2019, that boat crossings could be halved within weeks, then almost eliminated to become an "infrequent phenomenon" by 2020.[2] The reality could hardly have been more different, as numbers surged over the next five years. Rishi Sunak's high-profile pledge to "Stop the boats" mainly came to symbolise the failure of government policy and its political consequences. Keir Starmer came to office pledging to "Smash the gangs". But the numbers making dangerous journeys across the Channel have risen again.

More than 170,000 people have now crossed the Channel in small boats since 2018.[3] At least 139 people have drowned.[4] This should be nobody's idea of an orderly or safe asylum system, but no UK government has yet managed to find a viable alternative. There is growing public frustration at the persistent failure to get a grip – but does the record of failure to date offer any insight for how future policy and practice could get it right?

Figure 2.1: Small boats made up more than 80% of all detected unauthorised arrivals in the last three years

Detected unauthorsied arrivals to the UK, by mode of entry and year



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office irregular migration statistics, Irr_D01.
Notes: Recorded detections in the UK refer to people detected by authorities outside a port who are believed to have entered the country without authorisation in the 72 hours prior to their detection. Comparisons between the different methods of irregular entry should be made with caution, because the detection rates across methods of entry differ. Changes in the number of irregular entrants detected could be a result of changes in operational activity or recording practices, and not only changes in the number of people attempting to enter the UK irregularly.

Why did the Conservative governments fail?

Immigration was a major political headache for Rishi Sunak's Conservative government, playing a significant role in the scale of its landslide general election defeat.

The Conservatives under Boris Johnson had pledged to reduce immigration numbers in 2019 but liberalised the non-EU visa rules for work and study, so that overall numbers tripled to record levels. On asylum and small boats, the Conservatives argued that it would refuse, reject and remove all of those who came to claim asylum without permission. The government passed several laws designed to ban anybody arriving in boats from ever claiming asylum in Britain. Yet this proved to be a bluff. The government could not remove asylum seekers if it had nowhere safe to return them to.

The Nationality and Borders Act 2022 decreed that those who had been in a third country that the UK considered safe could be declared inadmissible for UK asylum. But, after issuing 20,000 notices of potential inadmissibility, the UK then admitted almost all these people into the asylum system. Where there was no prospect of returning an asylum seeker to their home country, no post-Brexit deal with European countries they had travelled through, and no arrangements to remove people to a safe third country, the government had no alternative. A subsequent law placing a legal duty on the Home Secretary to affect such removals made no difference, as the new law was not given legal force. What the government did do was stop processing asylum cases altogether for those who came after the summer of 2023 – though it still then had to accommodate those it placed in this growing backlog.

Could a solution be found in Africa? A new UK-Rwanda migration partnership became the government's primary focus from Spring 2022 until the 2024 General Election.[5] In principle, this was supposed to answer the question of where to send failed asylum seekers with no safe country to return them to.

Rishi Sunak had been sceptical of the scheme's legality, practicality and cost as Chancellor of the Exchequer, and had limited its funding.[6] Yet he ended up staking his credibility as Prime Minister on being able to make it work. He could not. The UK Supreme Court found that such a scheme would be legal in principle, if the partner government had a functional asylum system able to uphold the obligations of the Refugee Convention. Rwanda did not.[7] The government chose to address this by passing a new law to declare Rwanda safe, whatever the facts on the ground – which the courts duly rejected. The scheme, like the planes to Rwanda, never got off the ground.

For all the political capital, civil service capacity and cash spent on the Rwanda plan, the scheme had the hallmarks of a symbolic political distraction rather than an effective deterrent. Even if the government had managed to operationalise the policy, the

UK-Rwanda scheme had no plan for 95-99% of those crossing the Channel. On its own terms, it simply lacked the scale to change people's behaviour and deter Channel crossings.

Making asylum more salient while failing to find any effective way to deal with it was the worst of all worlds politically. The Sunak government lost public confidence on control, on compassion and on competence with every shade of opinion. The Rwanda plan was too harsh for liberals; it was seen as all talk and no action for migration sceptics; and for those in between, the failure to deliver merely amplified existing perceptions of incompetence. Yet the political failure was ultimately a product of having no workable strategy for controlling asylum. Among the reasons why Sunak called a July 2024 general election – when he could have waited until October or December – was that the *idea* of the Rwanda scheme as a future deterrent was a stronger political card than the unlikely prospect of an operationalised scheme working in practice.

A reduction in crossings in 2023, primarily from Albania, showed how cooperation between governments could change the numbers of people crossing.[8] But there was no prospect of a deal with the countries producing the highest number of asylum seekers, such as Afghanistan and Iran. The government could have secured returns deals for failed asylum seekers from Commonwealth countries such as India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, but even these were put on hold once asylum processing stopped in the government's final year. This reversed its 2023 success in clearing the historic backlog by building up a similarly large backlog again, increasing the cost and the visibility of the government's failures on asylum, with tens of thousands of people in hotels.

Government figures showed that UK-French cooperation over the five years from 2019 to 2024 did impede over a third of those detected trying to cross. The problem is that an enforcement-only approach was effectively a futile game of 'whack-a-mole', since those who are stopped are likely to try again, and the odds were that they would succeed within two or three attempts.

Sunak's immigration minister Robert Jenrick (who was later to resign in frustration in December 2023) had written to the Prime Minister earlier that Spring to suggest that the most effective way to discourage Channel crossings was a deal with France. "We should be willing to make highly meaningful concessions such as offering to take one asylum seeker that has been successfully granted asylum in the French system in return for one illegal migrant that we return to them. Or indeed more than one. It is highly probable that the certainty of return to France would quickly break the business model of the smugglers," Jenrick wrote to Sunak.[9] The Sunak government did not succeed in negotiating a wider cooperation model with France on routes and returns. The Starmer government has arrived at a similar analysis of what might be most likely to work.

While this was a spectacular political and policy failure, the Sunak government's efforts do offer a handful of insights – both Do's and

Don'ts – for a more effective strategy. If rhetorical toughness and passing laws to ban asylum claims was enough to deter arrivals, the Sunak government would have stopped the boats. A policy of simply refusing all asylum claims has been tried and tested. The result was an enormous, expensive asylum backlog, which would always have had to be cleared whoever won the general election. This has added significant public frustration over asylum hotel accommodation to existing frustration at the failure to stop the boats.

Keir Starmer's attempt to smash the gangs

The new government replaced the slogan 'stop the boats' with its own version, 'smash the gangs' – expressing a similar objective but shifting the focus somewhat from the asylum seekers to those involved in people smuggling. A number of measures sought to deepen cooperation, including a new Border Security Command, though the Opposition questioned whether this was a rebranding exercise of existing efforts. The government proposed new powers and laws, drawing lessons from counter-terrorism operations. While intelligence, policing and enforcement can be part of the solution, the fundamental challenge for the government includes the low barriers to entry for new groups and gangs seeking to replace those that are removed.

The government ended the Rwanda scheme, revealing that the abortive scheme had cost £700 million without any useful product. This included £290 million in direct payments to Rwanda, as well as the cost of legal challenges, staffing and the costs of the abortive flight.[10] The new government did process the asylum claims of those who arrived without permission, a clash of principle with the outgoing government, though in practice there would have been no alternative in most cases. Restarting claims enabled the government to increase the number of returns to safer countries, for those whose claims were refused. The government made almost 10,000 asylum-related returns in the year to March 2025, up a third on the previous year.[11] About half of these related to boat arrivals, but they were predominantly part of the Albanian returns deal, with a fifth from other countries such as India or Bangladesh.

The Starmer-Macron deal and new Treaty of July 2025 opens a new phase for the government's policy, establishing the principle of cooperation between Britain and France on migration routes and returns. An initial pilot scheme may begin by removing 50 people a week – about 2,500 a year – though the government has not confirmed numbers. Since this is just one in seventeen people crossing the Channel, the early phases of the pilot are unlikely to significantly reduce the number of small boats or disrupt the smugglers' business model, since most people would know this is unlikely to happen to them.

The government has acknowledged this and says it sees the pilot primarily as a way to establish a proof of concept. "We are not putting an overall figure on this programme. Of course, it will start with lower numbers and then build, but we want to be able to expand it. We want to be able to increase the number of people returned through this programme," Home Secretary Yvette Cooper said.[12]

The challenge will be whether the government has the practical means, agreement with partners and the political and public support at home to scale up the UK-France deal sufficiently to make a significant difference to the choices that people make.

What happens next? The politics of deterrence versus compassion

There is a sharply polarised argument about what to do next. Vocal calls to just reject, refuse and return all asylum seekers have lacked any workable plans to enact that rhetoric in reality.

The Conservative Opposition propose reviving something like the Rwanda scheme, arguing that a deterrent is necessary. Yet the argument that the main problem with the Rwanda deal was that it was never tried requires a selective memory of the last five years. The legal, practical and cost hurdles to making an offshore processing or third country removals deal viable at scale remain formidable.

Nigel Farage of Reform is a populist politician keen to tell the voters that there would be simple ways to stop the boats, if only the politicians had the will to implement them. Reform's policy had been that the UK should simply return the small boats to France – by asking the Royal Navy to enter French waters without permission.[13] There is no basis in international law to do this. Reform is beginning to tacitly acknowledge that it is not realistic to enter into this kind of conflict with a NATO partner as its first act in office.

Farage's most recent suggestion, that asylum seekers from Afghanistan could simply be returned to Afghanistan, again highlighted a gap between simple slogans and practical solutions. The proposal to deliver refugees who fled persecution back into the hands of the Taliban regime is reprehensible in principle. Leaving the Refugee Convention would make existing or new returns deals with stable governments far more difficult.

This illuminates Reform's core challenge. If Nigel Farage's party will ditch international treaties that get in the way of its plans, can it still negotiate whatever international partnerships are necessary for the offshore processing or removal deals that the party proposes?

Progressive left and centre parties, including the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish and Welsh Nationalists and the Green Party, emphasise the need for safe and legal routes as an alternative to dangerous journeys. But those arguing for more safe and legal routes for asylum seekers have not secured enough political or public support to try their alternative either.

The Labour government has generated controversy with some of the Prime Minister's tough language about immigration and asylum, partly intending to show that it understands public concerns. Yet its strategy is fundamentally pragmatic and technocratic, seeking to show how it can make asylum work. It aims to process claims and clear the backlog of people accommodated in hotels. It believes in cooperation rather than isolation, remaining within the UK's international obligations, but demonstrating that it can deliver order and control while doing so. Its immediate challenge is that such change can take time, while the public is impatient for results. In the longer term, it needs to show how UK cooperation with France and other neighbouring countries can restore control in the Channel in an orderly and humane way.

3. What the public thinks: Why Starmer has permission to be bolder

No issue in British politics is proving as polarising as asylum. There is frustration at the failure of successive governments to control dangerous, unauthorised crossings in small boats. Attitudes are becoming less sympathetic over time. Yet most people in Britain do also want this country to play its part in protecting refugees.

Asylum polarises most starkly if people feel they must choose between control or compassion. Forcing that choice splits the public almost in half – with a sharp clash of instincts between those in different political tribes.

New research by Ipsos for British Future shows the potential of the UK-France 'routes and returns' deal to break the deadlock on this issue – if it is attempted at sufficient scale to undermine the business model of the people-smuggling gangs. Most of the public support having such a deal with France. Because this proposal combines control with compassion, it has a surprisingly broad appeal, across those with contrasting political views and instincts about immigration policy.

Sympathy versus Rejection: how small boat crossings split the country in half

Protests about asylum hotels, as well as much media coverage and political discourse, present a picture of public hostility to asylum seekers. Those images capture the anger of one section of the public over the issue – to which politicians and the media then respond. But this tells only part of a wider story of polarised public attitudes towards small boats crossing the Channel.

A quarter of people declare they have 'no sympathy at all' for those who attempt to cross the Channel in small boats. Yet a sixth of people declare they have 'a great deal' of sympathy with those trying to do so. Half of the public are somewhere in between: the 'balancer middle' splits evenly between having 'a fair amount' of sympathy and 'not much'.

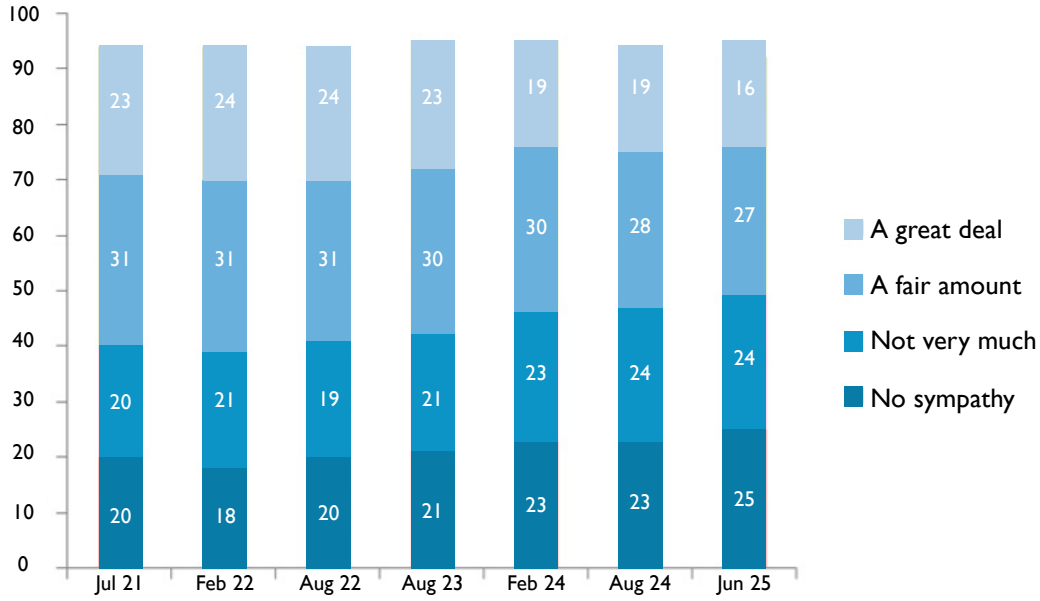
There are demographic differences: younger people aged 18-34 are more than twice as likely to be sympathetic to people arriving in small boats as those aged over 55. Women have been consistently more sympathetic. Views differ most by party politics, with Labour 2024 voters almost four times as likely to have sympathy for migrants crossing the channel in small boats than Reform UK voters.

Overall, attitudes have hardened in the last three years. A majority of respondents expressed at least a fair amount of sympathy across much of the last parliament. This was below half by the time of the

2024 General Election, falling again to just 43% this summer. Half of the public now say that they have little or no sympathy for those crossing the Channel in small boats. This declining sympathy shows that a sustained, polarised clash is damaging to those who want to maintain public confidence in Britain's tradition of protecting refugees into the future.

Figure 3.1: Public sympathy over time for people making Channel crossings

How much sympathy, if any, do you have for the migrants attempting to cross the English Channel by boat to come to Britain?



Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2021-25

Yet attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers are not entirely polarised. Most of the British public do support the principle of refugee protection. Seven out of ten people in Great Britain (71%) agree that "People should be able to take refuge in other countries, including in my country, to escape from war or persecution," according to Ipsos's 2025 Global Attitudes Towards Refugees survey.[14] One-fifth of people in Britain (21%) do not support that principle. This fluctuates with events: British support for refugee protection rose to 80% and 84% in 2022 and 2023, coinciding with a wave of sympathy for Ukrainian refugees, before falling back.

That Ipsos data shows the broad majority who want to see Britain playing its part in refugee protection alongside other countries. Yet unlocking and sustaining this public support is contingent on an orderly, workable and humane way to deliver that principle in practice. New Ipsos findings for British Future show how the public feels about different approaches the government could take to bring order to the Channel. They suggest that there is public support for offering safe passage to the UK for refugees as part of efforts to bring back control.

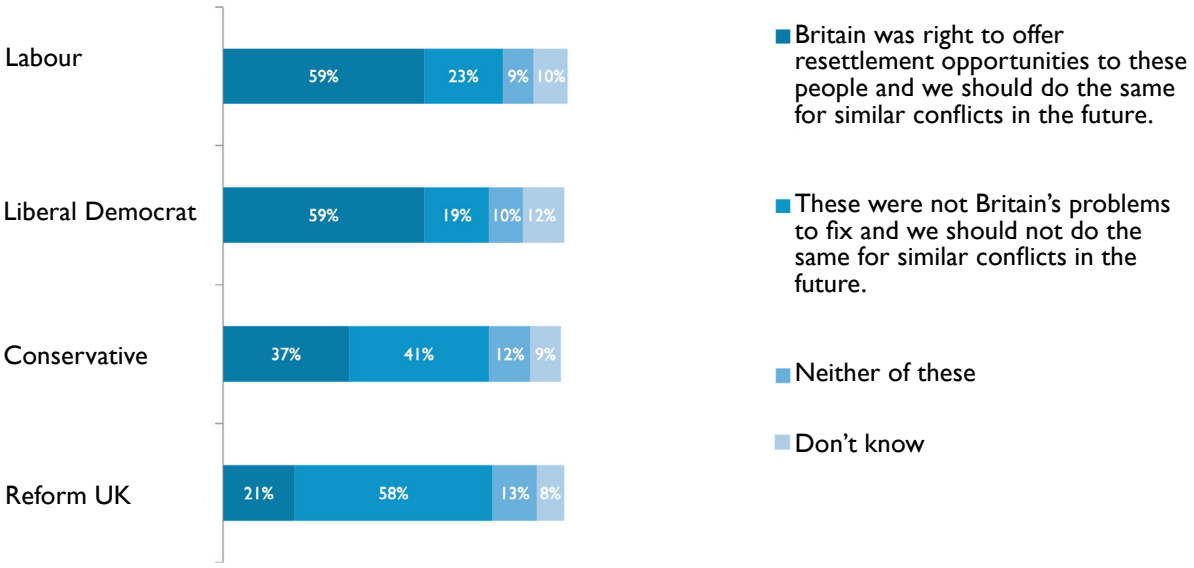
The coalition for compassion - and its limits

Over the past ten years the UK has offered resettlement programmes to people fleeing war and crackdowns on democratic freedoms in Ukraine, Hong Kong, Afghanistan and Syria, enabling some people to come and live in the UK. A plurality of the public agree that Britain was right to offer resettlement opportunities to these people and that we should do the same for similar conflicts in future. Some 45% say these policies were right and should be repeated again, while three in ten (31%) say these were not Britain's problems to fix and we should not do the same in the future. A quarter are on the fence or don't know, likely to include people with different views about particular cases, and those who may have supported responses to past crises while being unsure about doing so again in the future.

Unsurprisingly, the quarter of people with the most liberal views and those with the most sceptical views on immigration have opposing instincts. Three quarters of liberals would do this again, while six in ten sceptics would not. The 'Balancer middle' in between tends to support repeating Britain's past contribution in the event of future crises, by a margin of 56% to 18%. Six out of ten Labour and Liberal Democrat voters would want Britain to step up in the next crisis – while six in ten Reform voters would leave it to somebody else. Conservative voters were most evenly divided on the question.

Figure 3.2: By party: Public support for past humanitarian schemes and repeating them in future

"Over the past ten years the UK has offered resettlement programmes to people fleeing war and crackdowns on democratic freedoms in Ukraine, Hong Kong, Afghanistan and Syria, enabling some people to come and live in the UK. Which of the following comes closest to your view?"

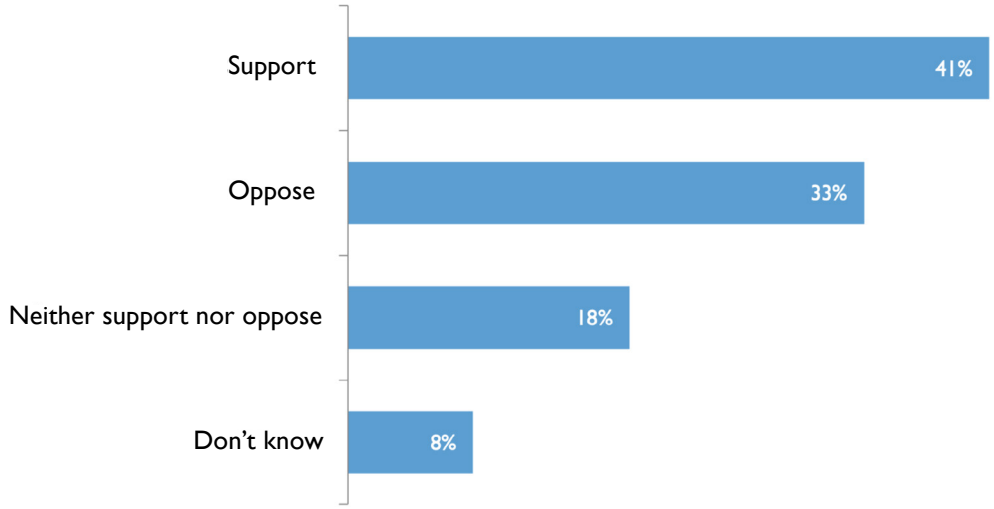


Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, n=3,003

"The UK should provide more legal routes for people to claim asylum legally in the UK" is a proposition that generates 41% support and 33% opposition, with a quarter of the public on the fence or unsure. A slim majority of Labour and Liberal Democrat voters are in favour, but half of Conservatives and two-thirds of Reform voters oppose it. It similarly polarises between the Remain and Leave camps of the 2016 referendum. Half of the 'Balancer middle' support this proposal, with a fifth opposed.

Figure 3.3: Public support for more legal routes to claim asylum

"The UK should provide more legal routes for people to claim asylum legally in the UK"



Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, n=3,003

Even amid the polarised debates about immigration and asylum this spring and summer, four out of ten people are attracted by the UK stepping up to provide more legal routes for asylum seekers. Yet the coalition for compassion cannot secure a broad public majority, or reach across the political spectrum to defuse party political polarisation, without a clearer offer to combine this call for compassion with greater control over who can enter the UK.

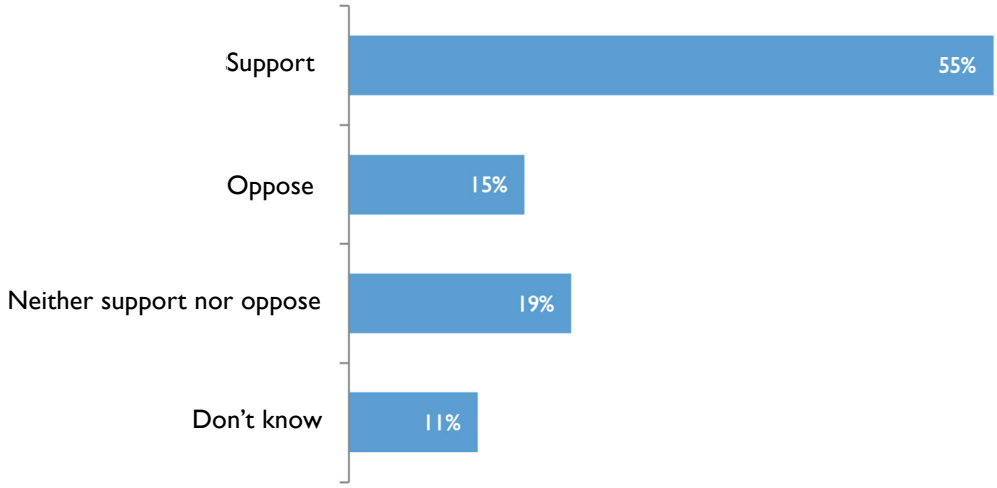
The broad majority coalition for a UK-France deal

Public support for providing a safe route for people to seek asylum in the UK gets a significant boost when it is part of a package that includes greater control and returns of those who arrive without permission.

The new Ipsos survey finds majority public support for a 'routes and returns' deal with France to manage Channel crossings. Some 55% of the public supports, and only 15% oppose, a proposal that *"The UK should agree with France a capped number of people that the UK will admit into the UK each year to claim asylum by authorised routes, in return for France agreeing to take back those who cross the channel without permission."*

Figure 3.4: Public support for a UK-France 'routes and returns' deal

"The UK should agree with France a capped number of people that the UK will admit into the UK each year to claim asylum by authorised routes, in return for France agreeing to take back those who cross the channel without permission."



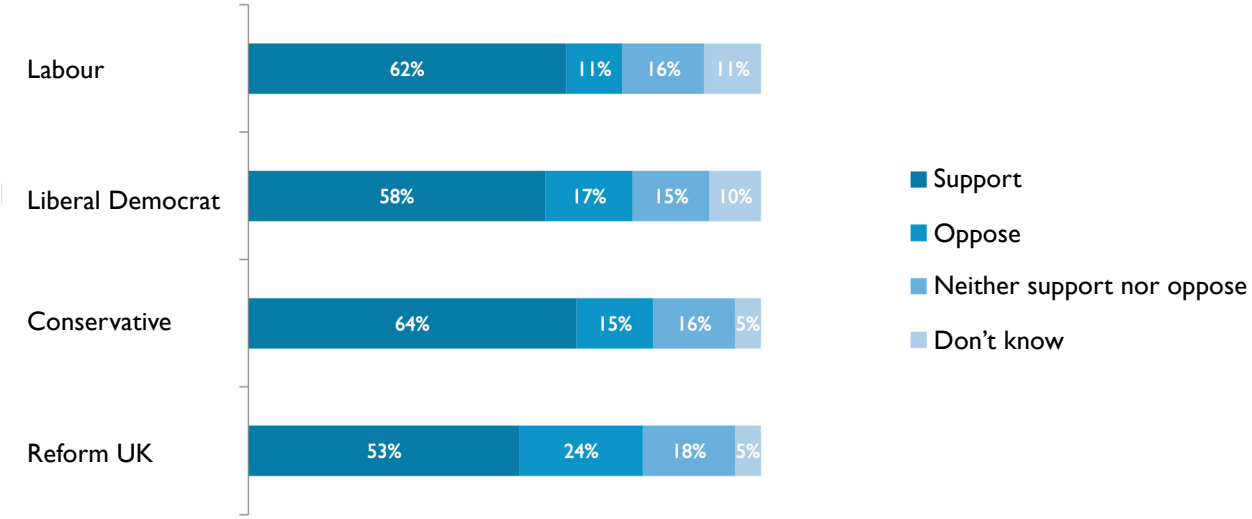
Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, n=1,502

What is striking about this finding is not just the 55% majority in support, but that opposition is as narrow as 15%. Most striking of all is how the distribution of support transcends the political polarisation that has dominated the public politics of this issue.

The principle of a UK-France 'routes and returns' deal has broad support not just from Labour voters, by 62% to 11%, but a strikingly similar level of support from Conservatives too, by 64% to 15%. This is despite these groups of voters having contrasting instincts about what to do about spontaneous arrivals. Most striking of all, a majority of respondents who voted Reform were willing to support this principle, by a clear margin of 53% to 24%, leaving only a core quarter of the populist party's voters opposed to it. It is a depolarising proposal which appeals to 62% of Remain and 57% of Leave voters.

Figure 3.5: By party: Public support for a UK-France 'routes and returns' deal

"The UK should agree with France a capped number of people that the UK will admit into the UK each year to claim asylum by authorised routes, in return for France agreeing to take back those who cross the channel without permission."



Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, n=3,003

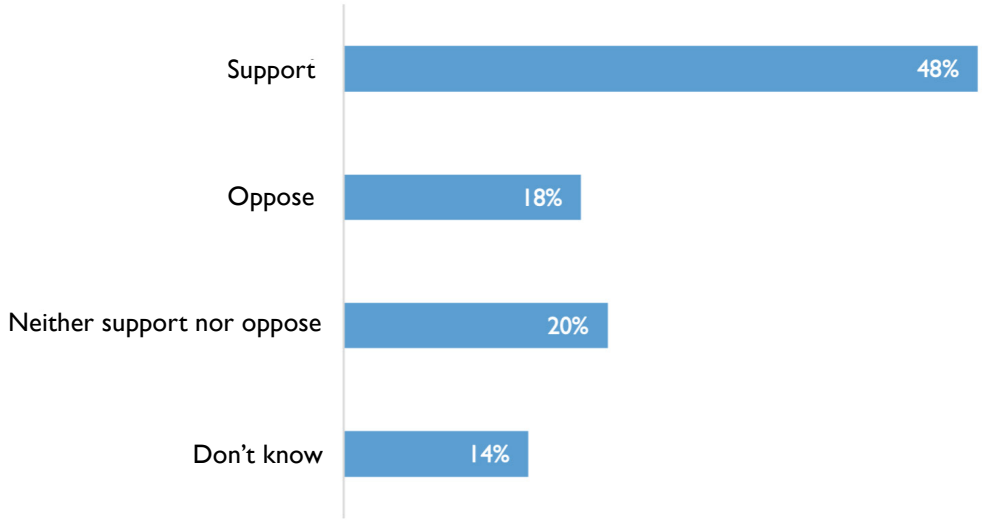
This is reflected in surprisingly even levels of support among those with the most liberal immigration attitudes – 52% in favour and 13% opposed (+39) – and the segment of the public with the most sceptical attitudes to immigration, where 53% are in favour and 23% against (+30). Support is strongest, however, among the largest section of the public, the 'Balancer middle', of whom 60% support and 11% oppose such a deal.

There may be ways to extend support in different sections of the public through the detail of the plan, particularly among the 3 in 10 of the public who are undecided. 15% opposition is strikingly low, given that a hardcore 21% of the public rejects the very principle of refugee protection.

But does support for the principle stand up to taking refugees in significant numbers? We tested this by including a significant number, some 50,000 refugees per year, in a seperate question about the policy. This would equate to a scheme approximately twenty times larger than the initial UK-France pilot. The number was chosen both because it is noticeably high, in order to test the resilience of public support (though it should be noted that there is much public misperception around immigration numbers – especially asylum); and because it reflects the scale of the scheme which, based on other international examples, would have game-changing potential for undermining the business model of the smuggling gangs.

Figure 3.6: Public support for a UK-France deal capped at 50,000 places per year

"The UK should agree with France a capped number of people that the UK will admit into the UK each year to claim asylum by authorised routes, up to a maximum of 50,000, in return for France agreeing to take back those who cross the channel without permission"

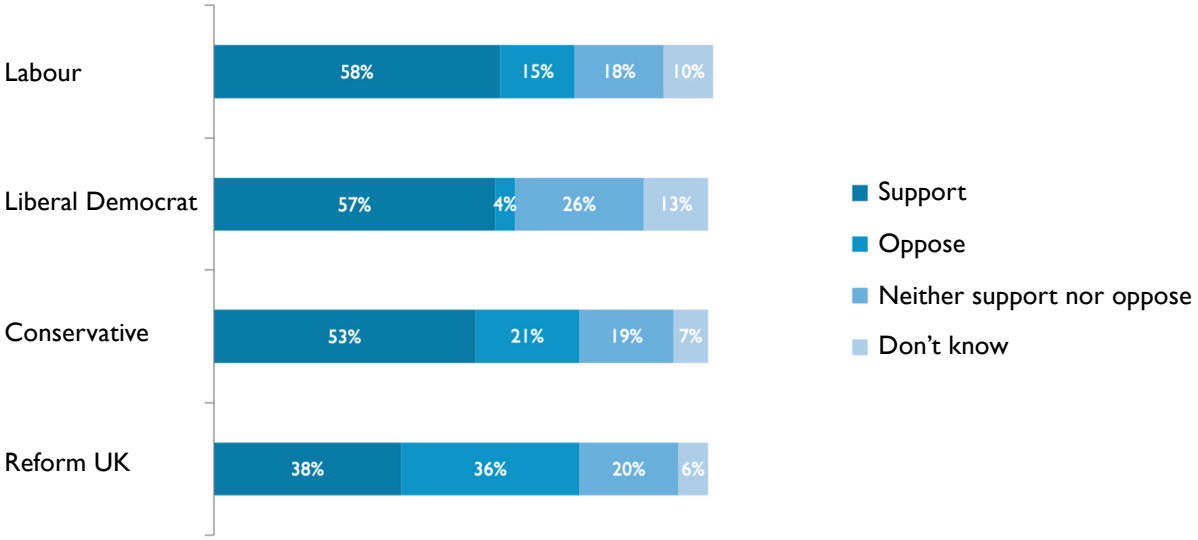


Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, n=3,003

Even with the numbers at 50,000 asylum seekers per year, there is majority support among Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative 2024 voters. Specifying the scale of the intake had most impact on support from those with the toughest views, with support from Reform voters falling from a majority to 38% in favour and 36% against. Yet even the Reform vote, which is motivated significantly by opposition to high immigration numbers, remains split into just over a third in favour, just over a third against and a quarter on the fence or unsure. It may be that those Reform 'swing' voters, who are open to voting for the mainstream parties, are more likely to support than oppose a scheme at this scale, while the core Reform vote is more sceptical. The expanded scheme is supported by 53% to 13% among Remain voters, and by 50% to 25% of those who voted Leave in 2016.

Figure 3.7: By party: Public support for a UK-France deal capped at 50,000 places per year

"The UK should agree with France a capped number of people that the UK will admit into the UK each year to claim asylum by authorised routes, up to a maximum of 50,000, in return for France agreeing to take back those who cross the channel without permission"



Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, n=1,501

The new findings suggest that there is potential for the Prime Minister to secure public consent to scale up the initial UK-France pilot deal significantly. Making it ten or twenty times bigger, to take up to 50,000 refugees in a controlled way across the Channel, could still have public support if it formed part of a new deal where France would take back those who crossed without permission.

Our analysis suggests that this is the Prime Minister's best shot at an approach that really could significantly reduce the number of boats – and rebuild public confidence in renewing Britain's tradition of doing its bit to protect refugees. The practical challenge for the government is to show it can deliver what much of the public would hope to see.

4. Lessons from America: From chaos to order

The persistent failures of UK governments to control boat crossings in the Channel have led some to suggest that the challenge is nigh on impossible. Governments in many democracies are struggling to manage asylum and navigate the polarised politics of immigration. But the comparative evidence does not support the defeatist case that governments are powerless to deliver the control that people want. Rather, there are important lessons and insights from both successes and failures elsewhere that could inform the UK government's attempt to design and deliver an orderly, workable and humane solution in the Channel.

The US in 2024 offers the most pertinent case study for the UK. After unprecedented increases in illegal border crossings from 2021 to 2023, the US under President Biden managed to cut arrivals by more than 80% in a single year. While US migration is on a much larger scale in terms of numbers, both the UK and US face similar challenges: migrants traversing neighbouring countries, overwhelmed asylum systems, and sophisticated smuggling operations taking advantage of both. The US solution combined coordinated international efforts, tightened asylum pathways for irregular arrivals, and the creation of capped, legal migration routes.

These core elements of the UK-France pilot were pressure-tested in year four of the Biden-Harris Administration – with great success. Between December 2023 and August 2024, illegal border crossings fell by 77%.[15] In December 2024, the U.S. Border Patrol reported an 81%[16] decrease compared to December 2023. The expanded legal routes helped reduce illegal border crossings from the four major sending nations – Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua and Venezuela – by 91%.[17]

While too late to make a difference politically, in 2024 America finally got the policy right

It is understandable that the words Biden, borders and success strung together come as a surprise. Immigration and border security was one of Biden's biggest policy failures in the first three years of his four-year term. It was also one of Kamala Harris's biggest electoral vulnerabilities and one of Donald Trump's best campaign issues. The 2024 policy success described below came too late to make a difference in the 2024 election. Biden's unwillingness to lean into this issue, Trump's consistent branding of the Democrats as the party of open borders, and the Harris campaign's late engagement with the issue, helped Trump win the election.

But the fact remains that a hardy group of senior policy staff in the Biden Administration experimented, scaled and integrated

policy levers until they got it right.[18] They defied experts and critics who argue that no centre-left government can humanely contain the force of accelerating global migration. They reduced illegal migration while maintaining humanitarian commitments. They combined control and compassion in a way that produced workable solutions. They cracked the code.

The following summary is based on extensive interviews with these policymakers. The key elements involved:

- **International Cooperation:** The US developed a meaningful partnership with Mexico to disrupt smuggling networks, manage migration flows, and accept the return of non-nationals who were swiftly removed from the United States. In addition, the US led efforts across the Americas to enhance border controls and expand controlled, legal routes to make migration more orderly. Among the notable achievements, Costa Rica and Panama stepped up to disrupt smuggling through their nations, and Colombia gave work permits to most of the nearly 3 million Venezuelans hosted there, stabilising the exile population and dissuading most from heading to the US-Mexico border.

- **Asylum Reforms:** In June of 2024, with the US Congress deadlocked and unable to act on border security, the Biden Administration took unilateral emergency action. This involved (i) making it much harder to gain entry to the US by crossing the border illegally and claiming asylum; (ii) swiftly returning those who arrived illegally as well as increasing deportations of those ruled ineligible for asylum; and (iii) expanding controlled routes so that migrants could apply for humanitarian visas and refugee protection through orderly processes. The measures had been subjected to extensive legal review, and the Department of Justice maintained that because there were multiple pathways to refugee and humanitarian visas available (detailed below), the strategy would maintain humanitarian commitments and survive judicial challenges.

- **Legal Pathways:** Beginning in 2023, the U.S. expanded controlled and legal pathways for migrants. There were three routes available:

    - **Humanitarian visas:** Over two years, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) issued 531,690 humanitarian visas to Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans – the four nations responsible for the majority of traffic across the US-Mexico border.[19] This incentivised legal immigration and disincentivised illegal immigration. The visas were capped at no more than 30,000 per month, and those vetted and admitted were sponsored under community sponsorship schemes by charitable organisations such as Welcome.us. Border Patrol found that these expanded legal routes led to a 91% reduction in illegal border crossings by nationals of these four high-volume countries.[20]

- **Refugee resettlement program:** Another legal route was through the US Refugee Program, which admitted approximately 2,000 approved refugees for admission to the United States from Latin America and the Caribbean in calendar year 2024.
- **CBP One:** DHS devised an app that enabled migrants, especially those who had reached northern Mexico, to set up appointments at border ports of entry. Part of the US partnership with Mexico, a monthly average of 45,000 such appointments were issued during 2024. This served as something of a safety valve that took pressure off Mexican communities along the border.

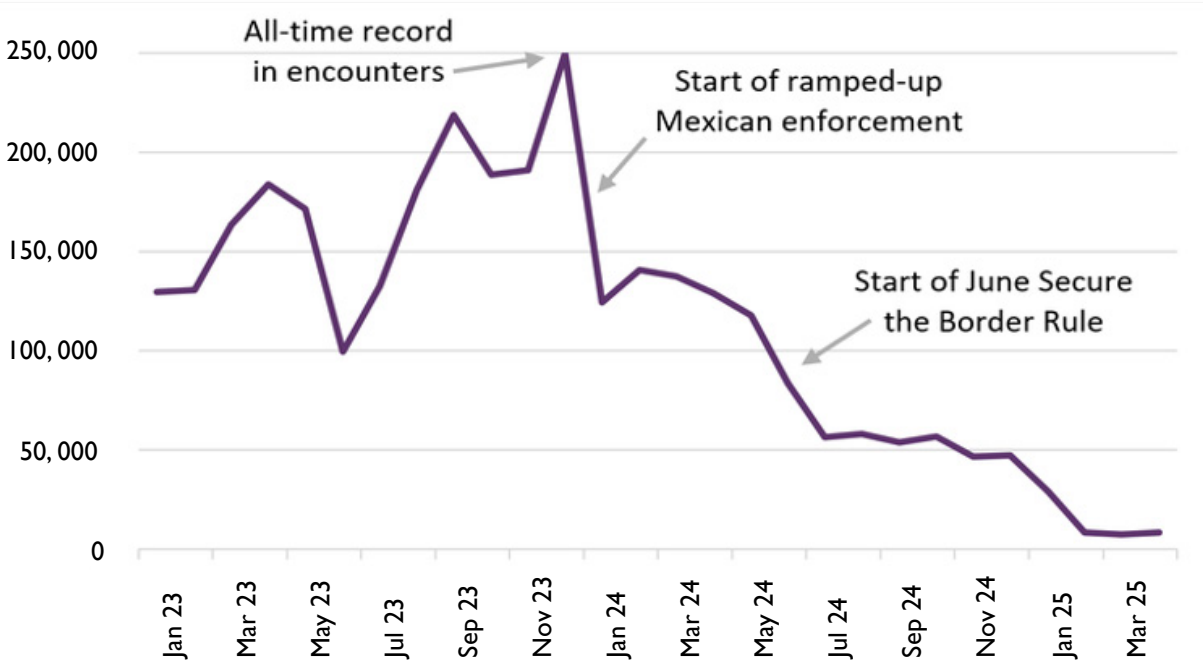
This scaled and integrated strategy sent a clear message to would-be migrants: heading to the border with smugglers was dangerous, expensive and would almost certainly result in removal to Mexico or deportation back to the country of origin. The best way to get into the United States was to queue up, apply through one of the legal routes, and seek admission through a controlled and orderly process. There was no guarantee of getting admitted, but at least there was a chance.

What was the impact on illegal border crossings? Throughout 2024, the smugglers' business model nearly collapsed. In December 2023, a record high of 249,785 encounters between ports of entry along the southwest border were recorded by the Border Patrol.[21] Yet by December 2024, a record low of 47,330 encounters between ports of entry along the southwest border were recorded by the Border Patrol. This represents an 81% reduction in illegal immigration across the US-Mexico border.[22]

Importantly, this rapid decline in irregular border crossings far outstripped the number of admissions under the new regular route. Total monthly admissions across 2024, through the new legal routes, were capped at 77,000. This compares to a peak of 250,000 unauthorised crossings in a month before the new policy was introduced. Biden's programme was not just swapping illegal migration for legal migration – it was reducing the overall numbers coming to the US by changing migrants' decisions about coming to the US. This, in turn, took away the market for the smuggling gangs.

For example, assuming those crossing the border illegally to apply for asylum had continued at the level of December 2023, at least 250,000 migrants would have attempted to cross the US-Mexico border each month in 2024. But the combination of elements, including a total of 77,000 legal slots per month to disincentive illegal migration and incentivize legal migration, reduced the anticipated level of illegal immigration by 200,000 a month by December 2024. Indeed, the number of border encounters declined below the level of legal slots available, but maintaining those routes continued to send the message to migrants that there was a safe, legal and orderly alternative to paying a smuggler and crossing the border without authorisation.

Figure 4.1: Irregular Migrant Encounters by U.S. Border Patrol at U.S.-Mexico Border, 2023–25 (Migration Policy Institute)



Note: The data here reflect encounters recorded by the U.S. Border Patrol of migrants crossing the border without authorisation; U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Office of Field Operations encounters of migrants arriving at a U.S. port of entry without prior authorisation to enter are not included here. Source: CBP, "CBP Nationwide Encounters," accessed May 29, 2025.

Immigration and border security under Trump 2.0 to date

The Trump Administration has ended asylum at the southern border, eliminated all legal channels for refugees and those seeking humanitarian visas and protection, threatened regional allies with tariffs, slashed legal immigration levels and, perhaps most notably, has launched an aggressive campaign of mass roundups of immigrants living and working in the US. President Trump's goal in year one is to deport one million immigrants and significantly reduce legal immigration levels to achieve a net negative immigration rate for the US – something that has never been done before in modern America.

Most of these measures are being contested in the courts and in the court of public opinion. As of August this year, 58 significant federal court decisions have gone against Trump's immigration agenda, blocking many of the President's signature initiatives, including attempts to expedite mass deportations, end birthright citizenship, halt refugee resettlement, restrict asylum at the US-Mexico border and conduct ethnically targeted immigration raids.[23] But because the Supreme Court has made it much more difficult for temporary injunctions to apply nationwide, most of the Trump Administration's initiatives are proceeding until final

court decisions are rendered. Trump's most notable success – bringing down the number of illegal crossings at the southwest border even more than the 2024 Biden Administration – relies on dubious legal grounds that could well be overturned in the federal courts. Whether Trump will follow such rulings is another question – and should serve as a cautionary tale for those tempted by the simplistic slogans and disregard for law that characterise the quest for power by many parties of the populist right.

Early in his term, immigration ranked as Trump's best issue, with public support routinely topping 50%.[24] Six months into his second term, his approval ratings on immigration have plummeted.[25] In an annual Gallup survey of immigration attitudes released in July, only 35% now approve of Trump's handling of the issue while 62% disapprove. Moreover, there are twice as many voters who strongly disapprove, by a margin of 45% to 21%. And while a strong majority support the deportation of convicted criminals, only 38% currently say they support deporting all undocumented immigrants, down from a high of 47% during his 2024 campaign.

So strong is the backlash that a record-high 79% of Americans now say immigration is a good thing for the country, up from 64% just a year ago. Finally, when Americans are given a choice, there is a strong preference for providing a pathway to citizenship over mass deportation. A recent Quinnipiac poll showed support for citizenship over deportations by a margin of 64% to 31%.[26]

This should not come as a surprise. The sweet spot of public opinion on immigration in America is a combination of control and compassion.[27] The majority of voters want to encourage legal immigration and discourage illegal immigration. They prioritise effective control, rather than lower numbers. These dynamics help explain the swings in public opinion. Joe Biden's inability to strike the right balance between compassion and control cost him and his Vice President dearly. But Trump's unwillingness to temper his quest for control with any compassion at all is costing him the support of the American people – and putting his aggressive tactics on a collision course with federal courts and mid-term voters.

5. Policy and Politics: Applying US lessons in the UK

In Biden's first year, 2021, border arrivals surged to historic highs. America was emerging from the darkest days of the pandemic and Latin America was not. Biden's shift in tone on immigration from Trump encouraged would-be migrants throughout the Americas, and sophisticated smuggling networks met the demand. In the first three years of Biden's presidency, an average of 2 million migrants a year crossed the border illegally.

The public and political backlash was ferocious, turning immigration and border security into Biden's worst policy issue. The White House, unsure of how to get on top of the issue, downplayed it.[28] The approach backfired. To voters, it smacked of indifference and incompetence. To Trump and the GOP, it created a huge narrative vacuum they were only too happy to fill. Trump and Republicans succeeded in branding the surge the "Biden border crisis" and labeled Democrats as the party of "open borders."

As described earlier, in 2024 the Biden Administration finally succeeded in dramatically reducing illegal arrivals at the border. But the argument had already been won by Trump's Republicans. When voters were asked about the huge decline in illegal border crossings in the run up to the election, the most common responses were either "these claims are just election year lies" or "if they can do this in year four why didn't they do it earlier?"

When new presidential nominee Kamala Harris eventually did what her predecessor would not, speaking out on border security, it was too little, too late. Immigration turned out to be Trump's best issue and Harris's worst.

There are political lessons for Keir Starmer's government from the Biden and Harris experience. The first is not to duck the issue. Illegal migration, especially Channel crossings, is a top concern for UK voters. Starmer's government seems to get this: it has prioritised migration in the reset strategy with the EU, and made clear its determination to reduce boat arrivals, curb asylum abuse, crack down on smugglers and end the use of hotels for asylum applicants. This avoids repeating Biden's key political error, though the UK government will, of course, be judged by results.

A successful strategy must also be authentic for a centre-left government – which means offering the 'both/and' approach of control and compassion. This is what most voters want. Strict controls can reduce illegal migration and eliminate scenes of chaos, as well as keeping overall numbers in check. But to shift migrant incentives away from smugglers, these controls need to be combined with orderly, legal migration routes that vet and admit people who need asylum, within prescribed limits. Finally, government should also support communities that are experiencing

rapid population change, being honest about trade-offs and fair to both existing residents and new arrivals – something the Biden administration failed to do.

The 'sweet spot' requires the government to align the policy, narrative and politics. Keir Starmer will be judged on his ability to shift the balance from uncontrolled boat crossings to controlled and orderly migration and refugee protection. His government must also communicate its plans and outcomes clearly and consistently so that voter mistrust gives way to majority support. And he must get the policy right. To do that, he can draw from a series of key policy lessons from the US.

1) It can be done

Some academics and activists argue that the accelerating force of global migration makes it impossible for centre-left governments to contain the movement of migrants humanely. They maintain that the combination of war, human rights violations, corruption, stunted opportunities, climate change and more, combined with instantaneous communications and sophisticated smuggling networks, is too powerful for a nation such as the United States or the United Kingdom to manage and mitigate. But the facts suggest otherwise. America in 2024 reduced irregular migration by 81 %, underscoring the viability of a balanced strategy that imposes order and control on a previously uncontrolled and chaotic process.

2) Go big or go home

In 2024, the strategy that produced record reductions scaled and integrated the three key policy elements: international cooperation, robust and speedy returns, and expansive legal routes. But in 2023, when the U.S. pilot-tested the same elements, the lack of scale led to failure. The cooperation with Mexico was insufficient, the restrictions on asylum were too weak, and the expanded legal pathways too disconnected from the other two elements. The result: in December 2023, the Border Patrol recorded the highest monthly total of irregular arrivals in history – on top of the 77,000 arrivals through legal routes. Only when all three elements of the strategy were executed and integrated at scale did the strategy shift the incentives for migrants and smugglers alike. Migrants opted for the queue, and many smugglers were put out of business. Expanding legal migration routes is not without political risk – but the bigger risk may be trying to operate the scheme at too small a scale.

3) Set a clear goal and do what it takes to meet it

We recommend that the UK government set the goal of a 75% reduction in small boat arrivals over the next three years. The American example strongly suggests that a coordinated strategy, if it is big enough and bold enough, can achieve similar results. Firstly, it corrects for the American mistake of waiting until it was too late to impact public opinion and the 2024 election. Second, it puts

the scaling of policy elements at the service of reaching the goal. So if the UK government needs to increase the numbers admitted under the new UK-France 'routes and returns' deal by a factor of 10 (25,000 per year) or even 20 (50,000 per year), they would do so as part of a strategy to reduce small boat arrivals by 75%. Given the public's prioritisation of control over numbers, a bold goal and increased legal admissions is better placed to withstand attacks on the strategy from opponents.

4) Understand and work with France's incentives

Without question, the cornerstone of the successful 2024 strategy along the US-Mexico border was the partnership with Mexico. In 2024, the Mexican authorities recognised that the increased migration challenges throughout the Americas were likely to end up as a Mexico problem unless they took decisive action in concert with the Americans. The old days of waving people through on their way to the US-Mexico border was no longer sustainable.

Similarly, France is getting more serious about small boats leaving its shores for the UK, for three main reasons. Firstly, France has a strong interest in reducing the factors that pull migrants to their nation: if the demand for smuggling begins to collapse, it reduces the draw of migrants to France hoping to make it to the UK. Secondly, Emmanuel Macron is clearly more interested in working with his ally Keir Starmer to fix the problem in a balanced way, rather than face a British successor bent on confrontation.

A third reason is that this bilateral agreement is a step towards a more assertive European-wide strategy. A new EU Asylum and Migration Management Regulation (AMMR) is coming into force in 2026 that will strengthen both the original 'first country of entry' rule and its solidarity mechanisms, where EU member states must help those facing high arrivals. Beyond these changes, the EU is debating where and how it might set up externalised processing in safe countries. Progress towards an approach that will replace chaos, boats and smugglers with order, control and fast and fair processing, is motivating other EU nations to give France permission to proceed on this bilateral pilot project with the UK.

5) A surge in authorised admissions would be temporary

The routes and returns policy can restore order because, applied effectively, it changes the decisions of asylum-seekers about how to seek asylum and undercuts the business model of the smugglers. This shift in incentives and disincentives reflects the combined impact of increasing the availability of authorised routes, plus decreasing the likelihood of entry via unauthorised routes through more stringent enforcement.

This has a crucial implication for the UK-French strategy to restore control. The scale of "surge" in the pilot scheme to between 25,000 to 50,0000 authorised places a year – to create a strong probability of return for those arriving by unauthorised routes – would be temporary.

Once this principle is established, there is a realistic prospect of reducing crossings by three-quarters within a relatively short period of time. This means that a significantly smaller number of authorised places is then needed to sustain a very high prospect of return. When annual numbers stabilise at below 12,500, there is an opportunity to mostly eliminate the smuggling route by having a sustained and sustainable near-guarantee of return for those who attempt small boat crossings. Once the goal of a 75% reduction is achieved, it would then make sense to adjust the one-for-one agreement and establish a floor of 20,000 authorised admissions each year, to ensure that the incentives and disincentives continue to severely weaken demand for the smugglers.

6) Get the specific policy elements right

As the government puts in place the operations for the 'routes and returns' agreement with France, whereby the UK sets up a controlled route to allow a number of migrants to come to the UK in return for France agreeing to take back those who arrive on small boats without permission, it should consider the following specifics:

a) Ensuring that all applicants pass a comprehensive set of criminal and security background checks.

b) Imposing a monthly cap on the number of migrants admitted to the UK from France, to assure the public that the programme is not open-ended, while maintaining flexibility as conditions and circumstances change.

c) Granting admissions priority to individuals most in need, including the most vulnerable populations as well as those most likely to qualify as refugees – such as those fleeing the Taliban in Afghanistan.

d) Showing additional consideration when weighing applications for those who have immediate family members living in the UK.

e) Encouraging those admitted to engage with community sponsorship schemes, so these new arrivals are supported by private individuals rather than being placed in hotels.

The stakes for Starmer's government – and for liberal democracy – are high. Right wing populists in the UK, Europe and America weaponise immigration in their efforts to divide society, attack establishment parties and gain power. So Starmer needs to get it right on this, the toughest of issues. Success would demonstrate competence and strength, and answer those critics who say that politicians fail to listen and act on voters' concerns. For Starmer's Labour, that would certainly improve their re-election prospects. But beyond the UK's borders, success could also serve as a turning point in the defence of a rules-based international order under threat, as we examine in Chapter 7.

6. Stopping the boats on the other side of the world: Why Britain couldn't emulate Australia's example

No other country has had so much influence on the politics of both immigration and asylum in the UK as Australia. It had a reputation in Britain for having found a way to have controlled and selective immigration, contributing positively to Australia's economy and society. The merits of an "Australian-style points system" have been cited by politicians ranging from Gordon Brown to Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson. Britain's post-Brexit experience of increased control and higher immigration showed that a points-based system could be used to make restrictive or liberal choices about immigration.

On asylum, the Conservative government's political and policy strategy was even more heavily influenced by Australia. The campaign slogan "Stop the boats" was a direct Australian import, as were several of the ideas about how to try to achieve it. Yet the difficulty of transferring what had been done in Australia to a different context on the other side of the world meant that both the policy and political outcomes were very different.

John Howard won a comeback victory in the 2001 Australian general election with an uncompromising approach to immigration and asylum, refusing to let the Tampa, a Norwegian vessel carrying rescued migrants, dock in Australia. From Autumn 2001, the Australian government began sending people to Nauru and Papua New Guinea if they tried to reach Australia irregularly by boat. This 'offshoring' policy ended over a decade ago with the final transfers in 2014.

Australia spent £4.3 billion to send 3,127 asylum seekers to Nauru or to Papua New Guinea – a cost of over £1.4 million per person. So the costs of the policy, as well as the human rights consequences, were contested. The Australian government considered that a choice worth making to reassert control, but it was dealing with a far lower level of crossings than the UK. With current UK asylum flows, both the logistics and financial costs of an attempt to deter crossings by offshoring all claimants would have been far greater.

The Australian policy of 'turnbacks' involved the interception of boats at sea and escorting them back to their country of departure. Australia had agreements to send boats directly back to Indonesia, and for 'takebacks' to return people via sea or air transfer to Sri Lanka and Vietnam. Once these policies were implemented, the numbers fell sharply and have remained low for the last decade. It is difficult to unpack the precise contribution of the turnback and offshoring policies. UK governments tried to implement something similar to the Australian 'turnback' policy but failed due to the absence of a UK agreement to return boats to countries of origin or third countries.

The Australian Labor Party, under Anthony Albanese, bears the political scars of losing the arguments over boats twice in recent political eras. Labor politicians ultimately accepted the need to recognise public demands for control, despite progressive discomfort about the ethics of the offshoring policy. One lesson from Australia for progressive advocates of refugee protection is the difficulty of winning the public political argument if the debate is framed as a forced choice between control and compassion.

Having entered office in 2022, Albanese's government produced a December 2023 Migration Strategy that adopted balanced language, combining control with protection through managed refugee routes, supporting the contribution of managed migration and promoting citizenship. It is a technocratic, non-populist, social democratic approach – focused on the scale and composition of inflows.

The Australian centre-left is now managing to defend and increase Australia's refugee resettlement programme, from 13,500 places a year to 18,750 in 2018-19 and then to 20,000 people a year from 2023-24. Compared to our population, that would be similar to a refugee programme of 50,000 to 60,000 refugees in the UK. The argument for compassion within a framework of control has had a different outcome to that over who could stop the boats.

The Australian example strengthens the case that being seen to have control is more important than reducing overall numbers, when it comes to public perceptions of how governments are performing on immigration. Most people in the UK would be surprised to hear that Australian net migration tends to be about triple that of the UK. That 30% of the population is foreign-born, compared to 16% of the UK, reflects a different geography, history and society.

Australia has a selective migration system which is trying to bring people in. It has a reputation for presenting rigorous checks and hurdles to jump, before admitting those who can contribute. With over a million British people living in Australia, the UK public – with the possible exception of those from minority backgrounds – often knows as much about the Australian immigration system, via friends or family who have gone through it, than the UK immigration system and Home Office.

The exchange of political ideas and strategies between the UK and Australia is likely to continue. But the British experience of trying to translate the Australian politics and policy of asylum to the other side of the world demonstrates some of the limits of political plagiarism when it comes to controlling unauthorised arrivals. Democratic governments face similar political challenges and cross-pressures in the polarised public politics of immigration and asylum – but importing political slogans will not work if governments cannot devise policy solutions that fit their own national context and challenges.

7. Conclusion – the future of refugee protection

Refugee protection is at a crossroads in Britain, Europe and around the world. The next year could prove crucial in determining which vision of the future prevails.

The argument over the small boats taking the 14-mile journey between the French and English coast often dominates our domestic politics in Britain. Whether Keir Starmer's government can find an effective way to restore control in the Channel could be a crucial factor when the public decides whether to give this Labour government more time, or chooses to find out what Nigel Farage, Kemi Badenoch or another leader could achieve instead.

Yet this is also part of a broader international challenge where the stakes are higher still. Next year, 2026, marks the 75th anniversary of the adoption of the Refugee Convention. The 75th anniversary year is a chance to remember why we choose to protect refugees. The 1951 story, from the horrors of the holocaust to the convention, was about the need for a shared international commitment, rather than the patchwork system it replaced.

Offering a place of safety to those fleeing war or persecution has been part of Britain's story. From the Hungarians of the 1950s to the Ugandan Asians of 1972 and those fleeing conflict in the Balkans, Syria or Ukraine in recent decades, there have always been heated political arguments over how much we could or should do. Yet those refugees have, on the whole, successfully integrated into our society over the decades.

The 2026 challenge, however, is whether and how we can renew those values in this generation: how to save asylum, in principle and in practice, in a world of populism in the US, Europe and the UK. From Donald Trump's America to Victor Orban's Hungary, some governments are seeking to retreat from playing their part, weakening the safety net of refugee protection, or even calling to formally abandon the whole idea.

Some will argue next year that what seemed a moral imperative in the last century is no longer practical in this one. That changes in travel and technology – and to climate and economics – are creating an irreconcilable clash between the numbers of people on the move seeking sanctuary and the appetite of publics and governments to play a role in protecting them.

Other leaders like President Macron of France and Chancellor Merz of Germany, or Anthony Albanese and Mark Carney of Australia and Canada, will join Keir Starmer's UK in wanting to show that international cooperation can deliver an orderly and humane system of protection.

There is an opportunity for this coalition of the willing to recommit to the fundamental values of refugee protection in a changing world. To make the "mend it, don't end it" case for changing the multilateral system to adapt to a new context, rather than quitting because it is now more difficult.

The public, in the UK and elsewhere, will ultimately have a practical test of both sides of this argument. Can the advocates of cooperation show they have workable solutions, where the idea of an international community becomes a reality in which countries cooperate to play their part? Can those advocating using their sovereignty to withdraw from every treaty offer any practical answers, or will they find themselves in splendid isolation, with no plan to back up the rhetoric of refusal and removal?

To have a voice in this international argument – and especially to get a hearing from a sceptical public at home – the UK government needs to make tangible progress over the visible lack of control in the Channel. It must also address the cohesion challenges of managing asylum in towns and cities around the UK too.

This report has set out how the key 'routes for returns' principle behind the UK-France pilot has the potential to significantly reduce unauthorised crossings. It offers initial evidence that this blend of control and compassion makes such a scheme best placed to secure public consent.

Establishing the pilot matters, though it is likely to begin at too small a scale to have a substantive impact beyond establishing that the logistics are feasible and legally robust. Yet the evidence from comparable programmes does show that, at ten or more times the scale, this deal could start to make a dramatic, game-changing difference to small boat numbers. It can put the smugglers out of business if there is both an accessible opportunity to apply to a legitimate route, shrinking their market, along with returns and enforcement capacity that make the irregular route an unlikely and unattractive alternative.

An expanded UK-France scheme could also serve as a proof of concept for something wider, enabling a coalition of the willing to show how to deliver protection in both principle and practice. It has the potential to encourage broader cooperation between other European neighbours, and with countries further upstream, to develop a system of cooperation and solidarity in taking responsibility for the roles each can play in refugee protection.

If the policy and political challenge can seem daunting, advocates of refugee protection should recognise the scale of the potential prize too. It is the opportunity to save the principle of asylum and refugee protection from the pressures of populism in polarised times. The chance to make ours the generation that chose not to end asylum but to renew it and rebuild democratic confidence in refugee protection.

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British Future is an independent, non-partisan thinktank and registered charity engaging people's hopes and fears about integration and migration, identity and race, so that we share a confident and welcoming Britain, inclusive and fair to all.

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