



Future
Governance
Forum



THE FUTURE OF ASYLUM

| A vision for renewal

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About The Future Governance Forum

The Future Governance Forum (FGF) is a progressive, non-partisan think tank focused on reforming the state with the ultimate goal of renewing the nation. We make politically credible recommendations for reforms that can be delivered nationally and locally, build strong networks to test new ideas, and collaborate and use our relationships with public, private and social sector leaders to innovate.

Our current programmes of work explore:

- **In Power:** how can we reimagine government to make it fit for the multi-dimensional challenges of the mid-21st Century?
- **Mission Critical:** how can we translate mission-driven government from ambition into action?
- **Impactful Devolution:** how can we meaningfully and permanently devolve power to regional and local levels in one of the most centralised countries in the world?
- **Rebuilding the Nation:** how can we utilise innovative models of public and private investment to spur growth and rebuild our crumbling infrastructure?
- **Institutional Renewal:** how can we reform existing state institutions, and establish new ones, so they are fit for purpose and built to last?

By prioritising these questions we are thinking about new progressive models of governance for the long-term. Our working model is to convene experts and find ways in which we can bring perspectives from very different organisations together to suggest ways in which the “how” of government could be more effective at every level.

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About FGF’s Future of Asylum Project

FGF’s ‘Future of Asylum’ project is seeking answers to the question: in today’s world, how can the UK deliver an asylum system that works effectively, is consistent with international law, and sustains public confidence?

In this essay collection, we feature essays offering bold ideas for the reform and renewal of asylum in an age characterised by large-scale mixed migration, global instability and rising populism.

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Foreword



Lord Dubs

Lord Dubs is a Labour politician, former Director of the Refugee Council and leading refugee rights advocate. He was MP for Battersea 1979-1987, and later a Minister in Northern Ireland during the Good Friday negotiations. He currently serves on the Justice and Home Affairs select committee.

Between 1938 and 1939 the UK welcomed 10,000 unaccompanied children on the Kindertransport, mainly from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia. Travelling alone in the hope of finding safety, many of these children did not know if they would ever see their parents again. While Hansard – parliament’s written record – shows some parliamentary disquiet at the time, on the whole the arrival of these children did not appear to cause much anxiety and was indeed supported across party lines. During a parliamentary debate on the Kindertransport in 1938, the Conservative Home Secretary, Samuel Hoare, said: “*There is no page in our lifetime which is so tragic as that of the sufferings of the refugees... Wave after wave of refugees has drifted across the world, uprooted from their homes, penniless, destitute, no country found ready at hand to receive them, separated from their families and their surroundings... We, the United Kingdom... are prepared to play our full part and to take our full share with the other nations of the world. We accept the responsibility...we can play an important part.*”

I was one of those children. One of the lucky ones who was reunited with their parents and was then able to build a life for myself in a new country.

The year before I arrived, following the bombing of Guernica, 4,000 Basque children were evacuated to the UK, and in the immediate post-war period the UK welcomed over 730 Jewish child Holocaust survivors, among them 300 so-called Windermere Children. Later still the UK welcomed Hungarian refugees in 1956-57, Czech and Slovak refugees after the Prague Spring of 1968, Ugandan Asians in 1972, Vietnamese boat people, Bosnians, Kosovars and recently Ukrainians. It is a history the UK can be proud of.

In post-war Europe, leaders of all mainstream political colours, as well as public opinion, were largely sympathetic to the plight of refugees. The large movements of people across the European continent and the horrors they had experienced were understood. As was the urgent need for a human rights framework that would ensure that never again would our continent descend into unaccountable and inescapable brutality, nor deny people fleeing persecution safe haven on account of their race and religion, as was the case with many hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees. Churchill was one of the most vocal advocates for the development of human rights protections that included the individual right to seek asylum, and the UK played a leading role.

Several human rights instruments were adopted, among them the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1950 signing in Rome of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the 1951 Geneva

Convention on Refugees. Many of the rights we all enjoy today, and oftentimes take for granted, were codified in this post-war period. The human rights framework which flowed from it, strongly influenced by the UK, is one of the towering human achievements of the 20th Century and it is still a cornerstone of human rights thinking, rule of law and indeed democracy, today.

But now that post-war human rights framework is fundamentally at risk. Those on the far-right never believed in the promise of human rights, and they are resurging. A new world order is being shaped by so-called strongmen who wish to undermine the international rule of law and call time on the rights-based frameworks conceived after the horrors of World War Two. They have bided their time, and they are now exploiting this period of global instability to argue that agreements such as the Refugee Convention and ECHR are quaint relics of another age, no longer relevant or sustainable. As they always have, they blame the foreigner and use immigrants and asylum seekers to create fear and hostility. Many of those on the traditional right, inheritors of the party of Samuel Hoare and Winston Churchill, appear happy to row in behind them, and regrettably even some on the left are advocating a dismantling of the framework gifted to us by the post-war generation.

Brexit was a turning point. It unleashed a divisiveness that hitherto I hadn't seen in UK politics. One of its many damaging consequences has been attacks on the rules-based order, based fundamentally on suspicion of the foreigner. Brexit coincided with greater movements of people, from wars and conflicts in Afghanistan, Syria and the Horn of Africa. And, of course, over a million Rohingya who have fled Myanmar into Bangladesh, though we hear less about them because the TV cameras don't go there often. Climate change, meanwhile, is leading to more people on the move as farmland turns to desert.

We are not alone in the UK in facing pressures from a radical anti-migration party on the right and a daily news onslaught on hotels and boats. Faced with similar challenges some of our neighbours and allies, once staunch defenders of the post-war legal framework, are wavering.

Sadly, we can see all over Europe that this political rhetoric is increasing the public's resistance to people seeking sanctuary on our continent even though our jobs market demonstrates the need for more workers the more so as our population ages.

The challenge for Western governments, including the UK, is how to resist the nativistic cries from the right. Progressives must engage with this challenge or risk ceding the ground to those who wish to dismantle almost a century of progress. Just as it fell to the post-war generation to build our human rights protections, it is the responsibility of progressives today to mount a strong defence of these principles, or risk them being cast aside.

We progressives, of course, face different challenges to those faced after World War Two. The ugly faces of Nazism and Fascism have been replaced with other faces – grinning cheerleaders for Enoch Powell and Putin among them – but it remains our responsibility to provide a convincing counter to the politics of division, hate and fantasy solutions. Refugees will continue to come. Movements of people into Europe are likely to become the norm as climate change worsens, leading to more frequent droughts and floods. Looking ahead,

there is little prospect that the conflicts and tensions that lead to people fleeing will lessen in the future.

Rising to that challenge demands that we explain the horrors that cause people to flee, and that we demonstrate, in our actions and in our words, why welcome is preferable to hostility, just as we did after the war. We must argue that the way forward is greater international cooperation, including Europe-wide agreements about how to accommodate asylum seekers and refugees. We must find new ways to build social bonds across difference, and bring public opinion with us.

Progressives can and must renew the public's confidence in the legal framework that protects us all, and reform the broken system the Labour government inherited while protecting the fundamental principles on which the system is built.

It is important to emphasise that while there is nothing unworthy about being an economic migrant, refugees are distinct both in circumstance and law. Beyond the baying crowds outside hotels, I believe the public is far more sympathetic than the TV cameras and some politicians would have us believe, to the plight of those seeking asylum. In the wake of sometimes violent protests against asylum hotels this summer, what the media didn't show and the politicians didn't say, is that the number of volunteers stepping forward to offer their homes to refugees increased to its highest ever level. In July this year, the charity Refugees at Home, which helps house refugees and asylum seekers saw *"our greatest number of summer placements in our history of hosting"*. Those are the kinds of stories that we need to tell. High-level international agreements are the routes we need to take. Collaboration, cooperation and fairness must be the cornerstones of our politics.

This collection seeks to bring together some of the boldest progressive thinking on how to shape and renew our asylum system, and respond to the politics of hatred and division. To return to the words of Samuel Hoare, still as relevant today as they were in 1938. *"We, the United Kingdom... are prepared to play our full part and to take our full share with the other nations of the world. We accept the responsibility...we can play an important part."*

I. The values we share: Renewing rights and protections in a world transformed

Led by what is right; not by the far right



Nick Lowles

Nick Lowles is CEO of the anti-racist campaign group HOPE not hate. His latest book, [How to Beat the Far Right](#), is published by Harper North and available from all good bookshops or [online](#).

In late August, Reform UK leader Nigel Farage announced his party's intention to deport up to 600,000 people within five years if they won power at the next election. While there were few details given as to how this would be achieved, Farage was adamant that there would be no exceptions. Pressed on this, he said that even women and children would be deported if they entered the country illegally and a Reform UK government would happily deal with the Taliban to ensure the return of their civilians.

This announcement was by far the most hardline immigration policy set out by a major political party. It was also quite a change for Farage, who had last year dismissed this policy as unworkable, and an indication of the pressure he is under from his right flank and best articulated by the likes of Tommy Robinson, Rupert Lowe and Elon Musk.

The responses from Farage's political rivals indicate how they too are feeling the political pressure on the issue of immigration. Labour's sole response was a post on X which claimed that Farage was all talk¹ and the Labour government was getting on with the job of deporting people. The Conservatives, meanwhile, said that Reform UK had simply stolen their policies², this coming after a summer when Robert Jenrick, the party's Shadow Justice Secretary, had visited Calais in the dead of night to highlight lax French policing, joined protesters outside the Bell hotel in Epping and even scaled lampposts to put up St George's flags.

The way most political parties are trying to outbid one another on immigration would make us think they are simply articulating the views of the British people, but that is far from the truth. While, of course, a sizeable minority, backed up by the majority of the British media, are strongly exercised by the issue, a soon to be released HOPE not hate and Dale Vince poll of 45,000 people shows that only a quarter of the public list immigration and asylum as amongst their three most important issues. And even amongst this quarter, there is a broad spectrum of opinions.

There are some people in Britain who simply do not like foreigners, so much so that they will oppose any and all immigration into Britain. In fact, some would prefer those already here to leave and would not even consider the British-born children or grandchildren of immigrants to be properly British. However,

¹ Labour Party, '[Whilst Nigel Farage moans from the sidelines, Labour is getting on with the job of delivering for Britain](#)', 26 August 2025.

² Sky News, '[Farage 'has stolen from us' says Conservative chair](#)', 27 August 2025.

Behind the headlines: what people actually think about immigration

this group represents a small minority of British people. In fact, it probably reflects a minority even of those who would register their unhappiness with the government's immigration policies.

Understanding that those who oppose current immigration policy are not one monolithic group is essential if we want to address the immigration issue in a way that meets with the approval of most of the population, is fair to the migrants themselves and is morally right.

In early 2025, HOPE not hate analysed the opinions of 4,000 people who said they would vote Reform UK³, and while overall Reform UK supporters have far more negative attitudes to immigration than the population as a whole, there are big differences among them. Reform UK, like all political parties, is made up of a broad coalition of voters. Our analysis found five distinct tribes of Reform voters, of which only three have strong anti-immigrant views. Almost all (95 per cent) of the tribe we have called 'Working Right' – who are older, have lower educational qualifications and are more likely to live in rented or council housing, but strongly support workers' rights – think immigration has been bad for Britain. Almost as many (91 per cent) of the Older Authoritarian Right tribe think the same, as do 84 per cent of the Traditional Conservatives tribe. A fourth Reform tribe – Young Radical Men – are far less emphatic in their opposition to immigration, with 59 per cent thinking immigration has been bad but 41 per cent believing it has been good for the country. The final group, which we have coined the Moderate Interventionists, actually have a more positive attitude to immigration, with 52 per cent believing immigration has been good for Britain and 48 per cent believing it has been bad. This last group is drawn to Reform because they feel that both of the main two parties have had a chance but have failed, so it is now time to give a new party a try.

It is quite clear that different issues drive different Reform UK voters, and a sole focus on immigration is unlikely to succeed for Labour or – for that matter – the Conservatives. It is also important to understand what is driving this anti-immigrant sentiment. Our research found that the communities with the greatest anxiety over immigration and multiculturalism were also the ones that had lost most through industrial and economic decline. Those who were able to move, did, leaving behind older and more resentful people who were ill-equipped to compete in the modern global world.

For the far-right, driven by an ideology of racial or ethno-nationalism, opposition to immigration is core to their beliefs and activities. While they will campaign against small boats, hotels and immigration policy more generally, the agenda of the organised far-right goes much further, to multiculturalism and even the very presence of non-white communities here in the UK. As we are seeing at the moment, what starts as opposition to the small boats quickly slides into the 'great replacement theory' and the belief that people of colour can never truly be British.

Political parties cannot reduce anxiety or even hostility to immigration and multiculturalism by simply cracking down on immigration. Given that the areas with the most hostile attitudes were those with some of the lowest levels of immigration in the country⁴, reducing numbers of immigrants alone *would*

³ HOPE not hate polling, 'Reform UK is Closer to Power Than You Think', January 2025.

⁴ Data contained in Nick Lowles' book, 'How To Beat the Far-Right', September 2025.

have little impact on these people's lives. In analysis for my new book: How to Beat the Far Right, I find the output areas (in which there are approximately 160 houses) with the strongest hostility to immigration are in Hull, Stockton-on-Tees and the Abbey Green district of Stoke-on-Trent – areas of minimal non-white populations. Likewise, 27 of the 50 output areas with the most hostile attitude to Muslims are in Tendering, part of Nigel Farage's Clacton constituency. Here, according to the latest census, the Muslim population is just 0.4%

Immigration has become a totemic emblem for the many grievances people feel in modern Britain. It is the most visible indicator of a changing Britain. The liberalism, vibrancy and multiculturalism of our cities is contrasted with the sense of loss and abandonment in our former industrial towns. Immigration is seen as a consequence of globalisation, jobs moving abroad and foreigners coming in and taking our jobs here. And the strong view in many of these communities is that they have been abandoned and left to rot by the political establishment in preference to addressing the needs and wishes of new arrivals in the cities. This sense of abandonment is felt most strongly against Labour, the party which once so many in these communities would look to but now feel has left them.

This is not to say that there are not real issues to address, such as the strain on our already crumbling public services or a lack of cohesion in many communities, but lurid media and social media stories about newcomers getting benefits and services ahead of local British people only increase anger and the sense of grievance.

New analysis by HOPE not hate⁵ reinforces the linkage between anti-immigration views and poverty. A HOPE not hate poll of 22,500 people conducted throughout December 2024 and January 2025, asked people to choose one of five different possible approaches to immigration: stopping immigration permanently; stopping immigration until the economy improves; only allowing skilled immigrants that benefit the economy; allowing skilled and unskilled immigrants that benefit the economy; or having no restrictions on those who come in. The results were fascinating, with only 11 per cent wanting to stop all immigration permanently, 14 per cent believing we should stop all immigration until the economy improves, 33 per cent thinking we should only allow in skilled immigrants who will help with the economy, 28 per cent believing we should only allow skilled and unskilled immigrants who will help the economy and 14 per cent agreeing with the view that we should allow all types of immigration. What's particularly interesting is that these views have hardly changed since we first asked this question in 2011, shortly after the financial crash and as the new Conservative government was implementing austerity.

Using advanced data analytics, we have been able to estimate these immigration attitudes down to the 188,802 Output Area levels across England and Wales, within which there are approximately 160 houses. The results clearly show that those areas that support immigration being permanently or temporarily halted have very high levels of deprivation. Conversely, hostility to immigration is low in Output Areas with the least deprivation.

⁵ Ibid.

Stoke-on-Trent, which has three of the seven Output Areas with the highest support for stopping immigration in the country, is the UK's 13th most deprived local authority, with over 50 per cent of residents living in areas considered to be among the 20 per cent most deprived areas of the country.

It is hard to disassociate support for anti-immigration views within Stoke-on-Trent from its own rapid economic decline. In 2000, Stoke-on-Trent registered as the 34th most deprived local authority in the country but slipped to 18th in 2004 and 16th in 2010. In 2023, 13 years later, the city was the 13th most deprived in the country, and all predictions suggest that it could be as low as the fourth or fifth most deprived when the next national evaluation is done.

It might seem obvious to say there is a correlation between deprivation, pessimism and anti-immigrant sentiments, but this simple linkage is all too often ignored by politicians as they attempt to counter the growing hostility towards immigration and multiculturalism from elements of the media and their political rivals. That is not to say that events do not dictate a response, but they risk being done in a knee-jerk or performative way that either comes across as insincere or does little to address the fundamental issues driving people's grievances.

In May 2025, Starmer gave a speech where he said that the UK risked becoming an 'island of strangers', going on to add that new migrants needed to 'learn the language and integrate' and that high net migration had caused 'incalculable' damage to British society. The reaction was swift and harsh, with many drawing comparisons with Enoch Powell's infamous 'rivers of blood' speech, which imagined a future multicultural Britain where the white population 'found themselves made strangers in their own lands'. Coming a week after atrocious local election results and following several days of harsher immigration rules, Starmer's speech was clearly designed to counter Reform's surge in the polls. It backfired, with Labour dropping 4 per cent in the opinion polls⁶ as more progressive voters deserted the party and with no discernible pick up from Reform voters.

Britain's immigration and asylum policy needs to be driven by doing what is right, as opposed to being led by the far-right. It needs an honesty, clarity and resilience that it currently lacks, and it needs to trust the public more. The British people have a far more nuanced view on immigration than the media and political narrative would have us believe. Many people are uneasy about the numbers of migrants who have entered Britain in the last few years and the pressure the current levels of immigration are putting on public services. However, most British people also value the economic, political and cultural contributions immigrants make to the country, whether through the essential roles they play in keeping the NHS and social care sectors working – often by doing the jobs white Britons choose not to do – or their contributions to our music, sport, food and the vibrancy of our towns and cities. In sharp contrast to the binary political debate, most Britons can celebrate our diverse multicultural society while also having some concerns that certain aspects of it are not working.

Even when it comes to refugees, probably the group most vilified by the media and the far right, a majority still want Britain to meet its international obligations.

6 New Statesman, 'Keir Starmer's "island of strangers" speech has backfired', 5 September 2025.

In a poll of 3,000 people, commissioned by HOPE not hate in August 2024⁷, before, during and after the riots, we asked people to select groups from a list who should be allowed to live and work in the UK. While 'high-skilled professionals' topped the poll with 86 per cent approval, just ahead of health and social care workers, 70 per cent of people were in favour of 'people fleeing conflict or persecution' being allowed into the country. Those crossing the English Channel in small boats came in last with just 19 per cent support.

While much of the current political discourse is centred around small boats and the broader immigration policy, the real focus of many on the far-right goes far beyond this to the very concept of Britain being a multicultural society. While the majority of British people support multiculturalism and almost 80% want the Government to do more to bring divided communities together, the far-right want it dismantled. Unfortunately, through a vast radical right media ecosystem, they have a plethora of ways to get their message across to the public. Indeed, it is indicative of their power and growing confidence, that they have forced Nigel Farage to adopt more hardline positions than he espoused twelve months ago.

It is hard to under-estimate the seriousness of the situation we find ourselves in. The rows over small boats are quickly morphing into a much more significant battle for the very nature of British society. Racism is on the rise, and the very concept of our multicultural society is under threat.

It is exactly at this moment that we need our political leaders to show strength, courage and leadership, not only to face down this far-right threat and create a sensible and just asylum and immigration policy, but to defend the Britain that we love. In doing so, they will have the support of the majority of British people.

7 HOPE not hate, [FEAR & HOPE 2024: The Case for Community Resilience](#), October 2024

Let's tell a better story about the contribution made by refugees



Enver Solomon and Emmeline Skinner-Cassidy

Enver is Chief Executive of the charity, the Refugee Council. Enver took up the role nearly five years ago and before that was CEO of a London based charity working with young people in trouble with the law. He has extensive experience of working in the voluntary sector on a range of issues including, child poverty, criminal justice and social care.



Emmeline leads the Refugee Council's public insights work. She is also pursuing a PhD at the University of Manchester asking why progressives are losing the argument on asylum.

Introduction

Contribution matters. It matters in Britain that we all play our part. Do our bit. Of course, many societies around the world value contribution highly. But it has a special resonance here.

Where the Americans have the American Dream, we have our NHS. In Britain, we are bound to each other by our welfare state. Here, failing to contribute to the best of your ability is not simply a moral defect, but an injury to your fellow citizens.

This is something that our new Home Secretary, Shabana Mahmood, understands and supports. "To be welcomed into this country, as my parents were, is to assume responsibilities as well as rights," she wrote in The Telegraph earlier this year.¹

But the far-right - and the mainstream right alike - are exploiting the idea that refugees can't or won't contribute. That they are coming here for an easy ride.

This is not true, and we need to tell a better story about the contributions refugees have made - and continue to make - to Britain.

At the same time, we would be naïve to think the narrative challenge posed by the right can be entirely solved via a communications strategy alone. Misinformation lands where there's a kernel of truth. While many refugees have contributed hugely to Britain's economy and culture, too many are not in work. Not because they don't want to work, but because they're facing insurmountable barriers.

To begin to tell a better story, we also need to write a better story.

¹ Shabana Mahmood, [Foreign criminals forfeit their right to stay in Britain](#), The Telegraph, 9 August 2025.

From the cradle to the grave: contribution as a British value

In 1945, the new Labour government fundamentally changed Britain. From the cradle to the grave, British people could rely on the state to provide a safety net. It was the first time anywhere in the world that all citizens could access healthcare free at the point of need.

From the cradle to the grave is quite a promise. But the true significance of this promise is not so much the government pledging to support its citizens. Rather, it's the promise British people made to each other - and continue to make to each other - that is so extraordinary.

This new commitment meant that if our neighbour lost their job or became sick, the rest of us would pick up the slack - knowing they'd do the same for us.

This promise is not easy. We've seen time and again that the future of our welfare state is threatened when we start to doubt if our neighbours are really pulling their weight.

The concept of contribution therefore assumes a deeper meaning in Britain. Here, contribution is not an abstract virtue. Failing to contribute means failing your neighbours.

The special resonance of contribution in Britain shapes the politics of asylum. Our welfare state means that when someone joins our national community, they are immediately bound to us - and us to them. If they get sick or can't find work, we are responsible.

For the British people to accept such a relationship, it must be reciprocal. For the public to consent to refugees rebuilding their lives here, they need to know refugees have their backs too. That refugees are contributing, just like everyone else.

This is not a nostalgic view of Britain. Contribution holds just as strong a place in our national psyche today.

The importance of contribution was the key theme that emerged from two series of focus groups commissioned by the Refugee Council in 2022 and 2024.²

For socially conservative voters at the sharp end of the cost of living and housing crises, refugees contributing to Britain was a crucial pre-condition for them to support the idea of refugee protection in Britain.

For socially liberal and more economically comfortable voters, contribution was considered essential to a commonsense approach to asylum. Such voters support refugee protection on principle, but balance this with practical concerns around the economy and resources. For them, supporting refugees to contribute to Britain is a crucial part of an asylum strategy that combines supporting refugees with supporting the interests of the nation.

Contribution is also a theme appearing strongly in research into Reform

² The first series of focus groups was conducted by Focaldata in October-November 2023. The second series was conducted by More in Common in June-December 2024.

The opportunity: refugees want to contribute, and refugees do contribute

voters. Reform’s increasingly mainstream success derives from their managing to appeal beyond their base to a group of people whose anti-immigration views are not so motivated by racist concerns around the ethnic make-up of our country, but by whether our public services can cope.³ For this section of Reform’s voter base, the issue is whether or not migrants will contribute. Clearly, the vast majority of people voting for Reform are looking for the government to cut immigration, but they do not oppose all immigration equally. Even Reform voters support immigration where it is clear that migrants will be contributing to Britain.⁴

The good news is that refugees overwhelmingly want to contribute – and many have already made amazing contributions to Britain.

Marks & Spencer was co-founded by a Polish refugee. The iconic Mini was designed by a refugee. Much-loved performers like Freddie Mercury and Dua Lipa came here having fled their homes.

Beyond the limelight, refugees up and down the country are playing their part. One man the Refugee Council supported in Barnsley now works for a food poverty charity as a driver, delivering food supplies to people in need. Another man was a doctor in Afghanistan and, through the Refugee Council’s Building Bridges programme, has been able to retrain here in the UK and now works in our NHS.

The idea that refugees come here to freeloader is baseless. In fact, the Home Office’s own research showed that many of the people who come here do not have any conception of state benefits, having come from countries without a welfare state.⁵ Instead, they expect to pay their own way.

Our experience chimes with the Home Office’s research. Very often, the first question that newly-arrived refugees ask our caseworkers is, ‘How can I find a job?’.

So there are positive stories to tell. But they are being drowned out by anti-refugee misinformation telling us that refugees live in luxury hotels with flat-screen TVs.

The government has a responsibility to counter such misinformation. Last year, refugees supported by the Refugee Council feared for their lives as a mob tried to burn down the hotel where they were housed. This year, they have been left in fear again as protests have erupted outside hotels across the country.

Building a positive counter-narrative about the contribution of refugees in Britain is essential for this Government to tackle the rising hostility.

³ More in Common, [Local Elections: What Happened?](#), May 2025.

⁴ More in Common, [Local Elections: What Happened?](#), May 2025.

⁵ Home Office, [Sovereign Borders: International Asylum Comparisons Report](#), 2020.

Changing the narrative: telling the stories of refugee contribution

Part of the reason that misinformation about refugees spreads so quickly is that most people don’t think they’ve ever met a refugee. This means that when people hear that refugees don’t want to contribute to Britain and they come here for an easy ride, they have no counter-reference.

For the message that refugees contribute to Britain to cut through, it needs to be real. People need to see it. And this means bringing many of the hidden refugee stories in our communities to light. It is easy to demonise a faceless stranger. It is far harder to demonise the man who cuts your hair, or the woman who delivered your children.

If everyone’s favourite restaurant was set up by refugees 30 years ago, we need people to know this. If the hardworking community GP is the grandchild of Jewish refugees, we need people to know this. If the much-loved postman came to Britain from Uganda fleeing persecution – as is true in the case of Ken in Warrington⁶ - we need people to know this. Local storytelling is key.

Seeing is believing: the connection between narrative change and policy change

The government’s continued reliance on asylum hotels makes local storytelling harder than it needs to be. The hotels are by far the most visible part of the asylum system. People pass the hotels when they pop to the shops, when they walk to work. And what hotels tell people is that refugees are not working.

The reason that people in the hotels are not working is that they are waiting for their asylum claims to be processed, and refugees cannot work until they are granted refugee status. We could spend time and effort explaining to people why refugees can’t work. But this is not going to change the narrative on contribution. We need to show that refugees *are* contributing.

Showing people that refugees are contributing, when what they see at the end of their street tells a different story, however, makes this work very hard. For a positive counter-narrative to take hold, we also need policy changes that support this narrative.

Tens of thousands of people being stuck in hotels at huge expense to the taxpayer does not support a contribution narrative. Instead, we need to get refugees through the asylum system as quickly as possible so that they can enter training or work and begin integrating into and contributing to their new communities. The Refugee Council has published a proposal showing how the government could end hotel use within a year by introducing a one-off scheme to give permission to stay for a limited period - subject to rigorous security checks - to people from countries almost certain to be recognised as refugees.⁷

The hotels are not the only aspect of asylum policy fuelling the fire of the anti-refugee narrative that refugees don’t contribute.

Currently, policies designed to support refugees into employment are almost non-existent. But there are simple steps that the government could take that would go a long way towards unlocking refugee contribution in Britain.

Writing a better story to tell a better story: policies that unlock refugee contribution

⁶ BBC, [‘Long-term town postmaster and refugee retires’](#), 10 October 2024

⁷ Refugee Council, [Ending the use of hotels to house people seeking asylum](#), August 2025

First, many employers simply do not realise that they are allowed to hire refugees. Many of our clients are rejected from jobs at the first hurdle because employers wrongly believe that they do not have the right to work. To fix this, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) should launch an awareness campaign to educate employers on refugees' right to work.

Second, many of our clients struggle to access jobs equivalent to those that they held in their home countries because they do not have a high enough level of English. This means that they are not able to contribute to their full potential, and limits returns to the exchequer. To improve provision of English-language teaching, the Home Office should take advantage of the massive advances in language-learning technology, piloting an AI-driven adaptive learning platform to offer cost-effective personalised instruction tailored to each student's proficiency, learning style and progress.

Third, the DWP should integrate refugee employment support into its 'Get Britain Working' strategy, ensuring Work Coaches and Job Centre staff receive proper training on the specific barriers that refugees face. The DWP should collaborate with charities like the Refugee Council who have a proven track-record in supporting refugees into work.

The government could also learn from initiatives like the Refugee Council's successful partnership with the NHS to support more highly skilled refugees into jobs. Currently, there are extremely few pathways for highly educated people to convert their qualifications. We support engineers, doctors, and nurses whose valuable talents are being wasted because of the lack of opportunities to convert their qualifications.

Conclusion

Contribution matters. Whether you were born in Britain or whether you arrived here fleeing war and persecution, all of us have a part to play. That is the principle underpinning Britain's social contract.

Currently, a dangerous narrative has taken hold that portrays refugees as lazy and conniving – unwilling to work or give back.

We know that such narratives are false. Refugees are desperate to give back to the country that has given them safety, and generations of refugees have played a vital part in communities up and down Britain. To counter Reform UK's and the Conservatives' narrative, we need to tell these stories, focusing on shining a light on local refugee heroes: fire fighters, nurses, postmen, shopkeepers, lollypop ladies. The people who keep our communities going with refugee histories that nobody knows about.

But to fully counter the anti-refugee narrative, we also need policy change. Too often, policies are designed to keep refugees at the margins. If we want a positive story about refugee contribution to take hold, we need to act seriously about unlocking the true potential that refugees offer our economy. Right now, we have refugee computer scientists, engineers, and doctors, whose skills are being squandered.

The time to act is now. The idea that refugees can't and won't contribute is spreading fast to the mainstream. The public's support for refugee protection in Britain relies upon their continued faith that refugees can and will play their

part. To safeguard the future of asylum in Britain, we must show – clearly and powerfully – that refugees have entered our social contract. That refugees, just like everyone else, contribute.

The Refugee Convention 75 years on: The case for renewal



Beth Gardiner-Smith & Emily Graham

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Seventy five years ago, after the ravages of a World War and the widespread displacement of people across Europe, the UK played a leading role in drafting what came to be known as the 1951 Refugee Convention.

Europe is once again experiencing the effects of large-scale movements of refugees and migrants across its borders - driven by the instability of protracted conflicts, climate change and colonial legacies. This time, people are moving from regions outside Europe’s own borders as well as within.

Governments across Europe find that asylum has shot to the very top of the political agenda. Years of mismanagement, ballooning backlogs, and reactive policymaking have eroded public trust. In the UK, images of desperate people crossing the Channel in small boats has become emblematic of a system seen as chaotic and unfair. Into this vacuum have stepped authoritarian and far-right voices who exploit fear and disorder, and offer a simplistic extremist vision of mass deportation and withdrawal.

In this context, calls for a radical break from the rules and obligations of the past are gaining traction. Some of our neighbours and allies are no longer discussing but doing - suspending asylum processes in clear violation of the Convention’s rules¹.

These are global challenges that can only be resolved by countries operating under a common framework. Instead of rowing back on fundamental

¹ UN High Commissioner for Refugees, [UNHCR Comments and Observations on the draft law amending the Act on Granting Protection to Foreigners in the territory of the Republic of Poland](#), 12 December 2024

protections, it is time for the UK government to do again what it did in 1949² and provide a vision for renewal of fundamental rights and obligations in a world now unrecognisable to those who wrote the Convention 75 years ago.

Timely action then resulted in future generations of refugees being protected from persecution. We need timely action now to ensure that those persecuted today because of their religion, race or political views do not find the rights they have, eroded by populists who argue the obligations on states are no longer sustainable in a globally connected, more unstable world.

This unravelling of the global consensus on refugee protection is already happening with devastating consequences for the world’s most vulnerable. The Trump administration is reportedly pursuing major new restrictions on the right to seek asylum internationally³.

It is at this moment of rupture that progressive governments must act - confront the challenges of today head-on and define the way forward, or lose the agenda to the populist right.

This Labour government, profoundly committed to international law, has a unique opportunity to meet this moment with the political leadership needed. The UK should convene and lead a coalition of the willing to set out a vision for renewal of the refugee protection system that is fairer, safer and more controlled. This project must be anchored by the commitment to preserve the core, universal rights of the post-war refugee framework - the individual right to seek asylum, and non-refoulement⁴.

It will only do so, however, if it addresses the question of how refugees can fairly and safely access these rights. At the heart of the Convention lies a paradox. Refugees only gain protection if they can physically reach a safe country. For most that means turning to smugglers, risking dangerous journeys, or relying on sheer luck. This is neither fair nor sustainable. It privileges those with money and physical capability, while others are left behind or perish en-route. Reform must begin here.

We suggest three reforms to the system:

1. Provide asylum processing before arrival along migration routes to divert irregular, dangerous journeys;
2. Restrict in-country asylum, to deter people from travelling irregularly when not needed;
3. Implement these changes multilaterally with a new ‘Implementation Protocol’ to the Refugee Convention.

² UN Economic and Social Council, [Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Statelessness and Related Persons \(Lake Succes, New York, 16 January to 16 February 1950\)](#), 17 February 1950

³ Reuters, [Exclusive: Trump administration plans push at UN to restrict global asylum rights](#), 12 September 2025

⁴ Under international human rights law, the principle of non-refoulement guarantees that no one should be returned to a country where they would face torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and other irreparable harm.

These proposals are distinct from offshore asylum processing that involves forced deportation and detention to another country or territory before an individual’s asylum claim is heard, an approach that has been prone to human rights violations.

They are also a clear alternative to proposals to restrict the right to seek asylum to the first country a refugee enters - a position reportedly being explored by the Trump administration⁵. This would mean countries like the UK and US would largely no longer be obliged to play their part in providing asylum to refugees, a shift that could cause a domino effect of withdrawal from the Refugee Convention as countries neighbouring major refugee crises refuse to bear the responsibility alone.

In that scenario we would return to an era when countries could choose whom to offer protection to (or not), just as they did in 1938 at the Evian Conference when every country, but the tiny Dominican Republic, refused to give safe passage to Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution.

Seven years later, haunted by the knowledge of what humankind was capable of, the UK came together with its allies to build a lasting framework for peace, security and human dignity. In just five years the human rights frameworks, including the Refugee Convention were written, that have protected individual rights and liberties and underpinned liberal democracy since.

Today similar political leadership is needed to defend and renew our commitment to those values, providing a vision for renewal that can meet the challenges and opportunities of today and ensure the insights of the post-war generation are carried forward into a new age.

At the heart of refugee protection lies two ideas - the right of individuals facing persecution to apply for asylum in a safe country⁶ and a commitment by signatory states to not penalise asylum seekers for entering their country irregularly to apply for protection, as long as they show ‘good cause’.

The idea that governments would voluntarily limit their control over who can be admitted, may seem extraordinary in today’s political climate. But it was essential in the eyes of the those who vowed to never again allow the events of World War II when hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees were turned back at European borders because of border and visa policies⁷.

We remember the (pre-Refugee Convention) Kindertransport as an example of a proud record of assisting refugees in Britain. But not so often remembered is that the government of the day was able to deny entry to the children’s parents,

5 Reuters, [Exclusive: Trump administration plans push at UN to restrict global asylum rights](#), 12 September 2025

6 As first laid out in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights - article 14 establishes the right to seek asylum: “everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution”.

7 For example Switzerland’s border restrictions during WWII allowed for the admission of political refugees but barred entry to “Those who seek refuge on racial grounds, as for example, Jews”. See SWI, [‘The boat is full’: 75 years later](#), 26 September 2017

Refugee Convention: retirement or renewal?

many of whom subsequently died in the Holocaust. Only around half of the children Britain rescued ever saw their parents again⁸.

Advocates for ending asylum in countries such as the UK and the US sometimes argue that doing so would create the political space to offer more managed resettlement routes for refugees. But these types of routes place no legal requirements on countries to consider an asylum claim or approve entry for those with a genuine claim⁹.

We needn’t go back as far as 1938 to understand that humankind cannot rely on individual governments to set aside their political priorities and prejudices when it comes to who receives protection. The Trump administration has effectively closed down asylum at the US border and ended refugee resettlement to the US from some of the world’s worst crises, in favour of resettling white Afrikaners⁹.

Today the Refugee Convention continues to protect people worldwide: from Afghan human rights defenders who have received asylum in the UK, to over a million fleeing the brutal civil war in Sudan who have been able to escape across the border into Chad because of the Convention’s obligations. But in an increasingly inter-connected and unstable world with large scale displacement of people - both refugee and non-refugee - across borders, existing frameworks have appeared to fall short in providing governments with the tools to respond.

A vision for renewal

So how can governments restore greater order, safety and trust in the system, while preserving the fundamental rights that remain as relevant today as they ever were?

We suggest this must be done by addressing the question of how an individual can apply for asylum safely in destination countries like the UK, without taking an irregular journey.

We offer three ideas:

i. Asylum processing before arrival

Allowing people seeking asylum to apply for and have their asylum claims heard before they reach the UK could provide a way to address harmful irregular journeys, while maintaining the individual right to seek asylum.

Extra-territorial asylum processing has had a bad reputation with progressives to-date, being often used by countries to shift rather than share responsibility¹⁰,

8 Aberystwyth University, [The 1938 Kindertransport saved 10,000 children but it’s hard to describe it as purely a success](#), 22 November 2018

9 President of the United States of America, [Presidential Action: Realigning the United States Refugee Admissions Program](#), 20 January 2025
President of the United States of America, [Presidential Action: Addressing Egregious Actions of The Republic of South Africa](#), 7 February 2025

10 Pauline Endres de Oliveira and Nikolas Feith Tan, [External Processing: A Tool to Expand Protection or Further Restrict Territorial Asylum?](#), Migration Policy Institute, February 2023.

and involve deportation and detention such as in Australia's 'Pacific Solution'¹¹.

But if used to facilitate and expand safe and regulated access to protection¹² – i.e. allowing people to apply for asylum earlier along the refugee route, it should be viewed as fundamentally progressive.

The US system of Safe Mobility Offices (SMOs), established under Biden, allowed refugees to apply for admission along migration routes to the US border. With a virtual-first app-based approach, this model shows how new technologies could be used to secure access to protection without arriving at a border. Part of a package of measures that saw irregular border crossings fall by over 90% at the end of the Biden administration¹³.

Upstream asylum processing also addresses the use of asylum systems by non-refugee migrants as a route to enter and remain in onward destination countries such as the UK, by determining and refusing their claims before arrival. And it reassures publics that individuals have been security vetted before arrival.

This vision of accessing protection along the migration route is consistent with the new UK-France deal¹⁴, which suggests a way to pilot this approach in specific 'hotspots' along migratory routes, and at a regional (EU) level. Access to asylum could be provided alongside referrals to other voluntary and legal pathways such as community sponsorship and family reunion as we have argued elsewhere¹⁵, in conjunction with safe returns.

It is also consistent with UNHCR's new 'Route-Based Approach' which proposes 'multi-purpose hubs' along major migration routes where refugees can access regional assistance and processing to onward destinations¹⁶.

The obvious challenge to this approach would be concern that opening access to asylum upstream would encourage many more who don't or can't currently make the journey to apply for asylum. Monthly caps could control numbers, while lottery systems have been shown to incentivise people to wait for a decision¹⁷.

¹¹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, [Australia responsible for arbitrary detention of asylum seekers in offshore facilities, UN Human Rights Committee finds](#), 09 January 2025

¹² Pauline Endres de Oliveira and Nikolas Feith Tan, External Processing: A Tool to Expand Protection or Further Restrict Territorial Asylum?, Migration Policy Institute, February 2023 [Transnational Asylum: Toward a Principled Framework](#) (Routledge, 2025).

¹³ U.S. Customs and Border Protection, [CBP Releases December 2024 Monthly Update](#), 14 January 2024

¹⁴ Home Office News Story, [UK-France treaty targeting illegal crossings comes into force](#), 4 August 2025

¹⁵ Gardiner-Smith and Graham, [Asylum Management Centres: A new approach to tackle small boat crossings](#), May 2025

¹⁶ UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), [Route-Based Approach: Establishing Multi-Purpose Hubs - A guide](#), July 2025

¹⁷ Fratzke, Benton and Selee, [Legal Pathways and Enforcement: What the U.S. Safe Mobility Strategy Can Teach Europe about Migration Management](#), December 2024

ii. In-country asylum restrictions

Creating opportunities to apply for asylum upstream will deter many from risking onward journeys, but not all. In order to operate fairly and maintain public confidence, the system should also limit eligibility for in-country asylum to only those who have a 'good cause' for bypassing earlier 'upstream' opportunities to apply.

The idea of 'good cause' is found in the Refugee Convention itself, which prohibits countries from penalising refugees who enter illegally providing they 'present themselves without delay to authorities and show good cause for their illegal entry or presence'¹⁸.

The fact that most people have no other way currently to access asylum in countries such as the UK without entering illegally, means this term is currently interpreted very broadly¹⁹. However, if countries were to open access to asylum upstream, it would be reasonable to argue that most of those arriving irregularly no longer had 'good cause' to enter illegally.

What constitutes 'good cause' would need to be set out in law, but in principle should be stringent enough to provide a real incentive for individuals to await a decision in a safe third country, while allowing for exceptions such as risk to life or persecution if they applied upstream.

Those who fail the 'good cause test' and cannot be returned to their country of origin could be returned to the safe third country along the migration route from where they could have applied for asylum, to access protection elsewhere or gain assistance with voluntary return.

Crucially, this proposal doesn't end in-country asylum altogether but places restrictions on qualification where they are reasonable. Unlike proposals to replace asylum with voluntary schemes, the good cause test creates a legal incentive for governments to share the responsibility for refugee protection by delivering access to asylum upstream (as failure to do so would mean irregular arrivals were able to demonstrate 'good cause' for travelling irregularly to their border).

And it offers a way to retain the universal right to seek asylum, but provide governments with greater control over who enters their territory.

iii. Multilateral cooperation - a new Protocol to the Refugee Convention

Progressives have rightly been nervous of 'opening up' the Refugee Convention, fearing that the likely consequence would be a watering down of rights and obligations. However, the creation of a new Protocol, brought under Article 45 of the Convention, could address the specific question of fair and effective implementation of the right to seek asylum, while leaving the Convention itself untouched.

¹⁸ Art. 31 of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951

¹⁹ UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), [Guidelines on International Protection No. 14: Non-penalization of refugees on account of their irregular entry or presence and restrictions on their movements in accordance with Article 31 of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees](#), 23 September 2024

A new ‘Implementation Protocol’ could establish signatories’ responsibility to provide managed access to asylum from safe points of entry outside territorial borders, and clarify the interpretation of ‘good cause’ within the Convention.

More ambitiously, it could also include a binding responsibility-sharing mechanism²⁰ for asylum applications, setting out a minimum commitment by countries for extra-territorial asylum applications, alongside other voluntary commitments on humanitarian pathways. These commitments should be coupled with more funding to assist low and middle income countries of first asylum or arrival in the protection and integration of people fleeing violence and persecution.

This is not fantasy politics but achievable with leadership and clear purpose. The 1967 Protocol took just 21 months to negotiate and enter into force, following initial expert consultation²¹.

Without progressive leadership, the international system of refugee protection faces a perilous future.

So far, the UK Labour government has walked a careful line promising “to restore control to our borders” while maintaining a “profound respect for international law”²². Yet calls to rip up the rulebook and pull out of international treaties are growing.

With the US reportedly poised to pursue a restrictive international agenda, and a new UN High Commissioner for Refugees due to be appointed at the end of 2025, this Labour government must step up to lead a coalition of the willing to protect fundamental rights while reforming the system to deliver greater control and protection.

This opportunity may never come again. As the old order falters, now is the time to articulate a progressive vision for renewal.

²⁰ Building on the objectives of the Global Compact for Refugees

²¹ ‘The 1967 Protocol: Process and Key Lessons’, Unpublished Memo, Migration Policy Institute, June 2025

²² Prime Ministers Office, [PM speech to the INTERPOL General Assembly](#), 4 November 2024

The time for leadership

Protecting liberal democracy from populism and ethno-nationalism



Ben Goldsborough MP, South Norfolk

Ben Goldsborough is a British Labour politician who was elected MP for South Norfolk in the 2024 general election, the first Labour MP in that seat since 1945. Before entering Parliament, he served in local government in Flint, Wales—rising to the role of Mayor—and worked in communications and consultancy, with early jobs including retail.

Liberal democracy in the Western world is under threat. Populism and extreme ethno-nationalist movements are on the rise, feeding off chaos and uncertainty, attacking perceived foes and eroding the foundations of our democratic institutions.

For decades, columnists, commentators and policymakers have assumed that the United Kingdom would be immune to these currents. Westminster-style democracy was thought to be resilient, safeguarded by centuries of parliamentary tradition. The “Unite the Kingdom” march through London on 13 September 2025 shattered that illusion. It demonstrated that ethno-nationalist movements can mobilise, recruit, and provoke disorder, even in mature, ostensibly stable democracies.

We must begin by confronting the seductive power of nostalgia in politics. Not all nostalgia is the same. Scholars distinguish between reflective and restorative nostalgia. Reflective nostalgia is healthy: it allows us to remember the past with affection, learn from history and engage in dialogue about how we move forward. It fosters empathy and helps societies navigate change without idealising a bygone era.

Restorative nostalgia, by contrast, is dangerous. It tells people that the past was perfect, the present is broken, and only a radical return to “better times” can save us. This mindset underpins much of contemporary populism and ethno-nationalism. It thrives on oversimplification, conspiracy theories, and the rejection of pluralistic institutions in favour of homogenised, authoritarian control. Understanding this distinction is vital. Reflective nostalgia can build resilience; restorative nostalgia risks division, authoritarianism and violence.

The data from Western democracies underlines the urgency of this challenge. In Germany, politically motivated crimes reached 84,172 in 2024, including 4,107 violent offences, with far-right violence rising 23% and left-wing violence up 11%. Across Europe, attacks on political representatives are rising, with France reporting a 32% increase in complaints, and Germany recording 2,790 physical or verbal assaults in 2023. In the United States, politically motivated violence has escalated since 2021, with over 300 acts documented, including assassinations and attacks on campaign offices. Even mature democracies are not immune to election-related violence: in 2024, 40% of countries holding

national elections experienced attacks on candidates or polling stations. These patterns illustrate that the threat is real, pervasive and growing.

Those who believe rising living standards alone will defeat populism and ethno-nationalism are misguided. While poor economic conditions can exacerbate grievances, these movements are not simply a byproduct of material deprivation. Patterns of racist and exclusionary attitudes, and the mobilisation of such ideologies across societies, show persistence even in wealthy and economically stable contexts. The risk to democracy is cultural, social, and institutional—not purely economic.

As a Member of Parliament representing South Norfolk, I have seen first-hand how communities can feel both resilient and fragile. We cannot rely on inertia, polite debate or good intentions. Liberal democracy requires active defence. That means reclaiming the symbols that populists and ethno-nationalists have sought to hijack. The St George's Cross and the Union Flag, for example, should be reframed as banners of progressive, inclusive values, rather than tools of division. We also cannot shy away from honest, fact-based debates about immigration: it benefits the United Kingdom culturally and economically, strengthening the diversity and resilience of our society.

Practical steps must also be taken. Regulators should hold platforms accountable for allowing extremism to proliferate. Ofcom should scrutinise social media platforms such as X and Facebook, and the Equality and Human Rights Commission must ensure all users are provided equal service. We should look to international precedents—such as Australia's legislation requiring tech companies to pay local news outlets for content they scrape—to fund trustworthy journalism that strengthens public understanding and community cohesion.

Yet policy alone is insufficient. Those of us who have a platform must call out the ills of populists, nationalists and racists in all their forms. We defend liberal democracy not through neutrality, but by speaking out clearly and repeatedly. Holding a position where your voice is heard is an honour, and it carries responsibility. To end political violence and protect democracy we must act, publicly and unapologetically.

Freedom of expression is the lodestar for the United Kingdom. Freedom of speech is often misused as a shield by those who wish to silence dissenting voices. True liberal democracy does not cower from debate; it protects itself from hate speech, from rhetoric that seeks to corrode institutions from within. Freedom must be better armed than tyranny. That is just as true with populism and ethno-nationalism. Reclaiming civic symbols, enforcing equality, funding journalism, and speaking out are not just policy initiatives - they are acts of defence.

Populism and ethno-nationalism thrive on chaos and confusion. Liberal, inclusive democracy cannot afford to respond with hand-wringing. It must respond with clarity, courage and action. Across Western democracies, the message is clear: the threat is real, but not insurmountable. By taking tangible steps to defend our institutions and communities we can ensure that the United Kingdom - and the wider liberal democratic world - emerges resilient. The alternative is to watch, helpless, as our freedoms are eroded from within.

Rewrite the story or risk it all: Labour's test on human rights



Akiko Hart

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It is now commonplace to assert that in the new world order, everything is up for grabs - the rule of law, freedom, even democracy. We can now safely add the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) to this list.

The ECHR has often found itself a useful political scapegoat: it has both European and human rights in its name. However, even as recently as 2008, when Liberty published Churchill's Legacy: the Conservative Case for the Human Rights Act, withdrawing from the ECHR was seen by its authors, Peter Osborne and Jesse Norman, as a fringe belief, worthy only of a bullet point.

But now Reform UK have held a lead in the polls for months with a promise that withdrawal will be their first act in power. It is a live conversation even within the Labour Party, under a Prime Minister who is also a human rights lawyer. Gone are the days the ECHR lived outside of public consciousness. With daily headlines about migration and small boats that point to the ECHR as the blocker to sovereignty and control over our borders, the narrative has spiralled out of control. The public don't hear about the fact that the European Court of Human Rights has ruled against the UK in deportation cases just 13 times in 45 years, nor that the ECHR's positive obligations compel the State to proactively guard our rights in care homes, hospitals and schools. And so we now find ourselves in the dangerous position of our international human rights frameworks being up for grabs because of political actors offering disingenuous solutions to very real problems - putting all of our rights at risk.

How did we get here?

Attacks on human rights law are routine in British politics. They can come, perhaps surprisingly, from both the right and the left, portraying human rights as unfair protections for the most unpopular people in the country, or the entrenchment of existing inequalities. Labour is caught in this pincer movement, between Blue Labour fears about sovereignty, and progressive actors who dream of something better than the ECHR.

But what has moved the ECHR to the top of the news agenda is that it is now inextricably linked to the dominant political issue of the day: migration.

The past five years have seen the fallout of Brexit, an increase in small boats crossing the Channel, and a succession of anti-asylum bills contested in part due to their incompatibility with human rights obligations. Situate this amidst a crippling cost of living crisis that has left families forced to choose between

paying their rent or putting food on the table, and it is no surprise that vexed questions around fairness and equality have been front and centre of the political conversation, and that migration now leads the headlines most days.

Migration is now linked to the ECHR in such a way that it is virtually impossible to have a conversation about the Convention without talking about small boats and deportations. Forget Churchill, Nuremberg, or creating hope in the ashes of WW2: the ECHR has been successfully coopted as one of the symbols of everything that is wrong with Broken Britain. 75 years on from its birth, this emblem of protection and empowerment of the people against the despotic state has deteriorated in the minds of much of the public to a mark of the Establishment: a faceless, bureaucratic entity denying the ‘will of the people’.

The story about the ECHR is being retold. Supporting the ECHR has become defending the status quo; arguing against is to call for change. Supporting the ECHR is championing lawyers, migrants and criminals; arguing against is standing up for the people. If the ECHR is only linked to the past, to minorities, and to elites, then we will have lost the argument. If the ECHR is a proxy for irregular migration, then we will leave. This is the choice facing Labour – and what it needs to grip, through honesty, brave policy positions, and strong storytelling.

Being honest about the ECHR

It’s time for all of us – supporters and opponents alike – to start being honest about what leaving the ECHR would actually mean.

In relation to migration, opponents of the ECHR make two main claims. They say that leaving will facilitate the deportation of Foreign National Offenders, and that it will stop the stream of small boats flowing over the Channel.

The first claim carries some weight. The ECHR protects the rights and prevents the deportation of some foreign nationals who have committed serious crimes in the UK. This is one of the implications of the universality of human rights – they will apply to people that many will feel are undeserving.

Leaving the ECHR would allow for the deportation of some of these people in some cases currently blocked by its provisions – but it would by no means give the UK carte blanche to deport everyone the Government of the day deems undesirable. The UK is bound by other treaties, including the United Nations Convention Against Torture, which would prevent the UK from deporting people to countries where they face being tortured. The Government could bring in new immigration legislation that would remove routes to appeal and assert that deportation is conducive to the public good in a wider set of circumstances. But in order to deport all the Foreign National Offenders as Reform UK is currently promising its prospective voters, the UK would need to leave the numerous treaties to which it is party, stripping away almost all of the post-War protections that guarantee fair treatment under the law. All to deport people to countries where they may be tortured.

And how many Foreign National Offenders would the UK be deporting were it not for Article 8 and Article 3 defences? What is the numerical trade-off for leaving the ECHR? Recent research by the Bonavero Institute shows it is negligible. In the five years between April 2016 to June 2021, 922 Foreign National Offenders successfully challenged their deportation on human rights

grounds at the First-tier Tribunal, while 26,091 were deported.¹ Let’s assume, for the sake of argument, that withdrawing from the ECHR would enable us to return all Foreign National Offenders. Using these numbers, the difference would be fewer than 200 more returns a year. Is that really a worthy trade for our human rights protections?

The question for Labour and the electorate is whether the ability to deport 200 or so more Foreign National Offenders a year is worth withdrawing from the ECHR, and reforming other relevant legislation. You would need to have a serious conversation about how it would jeopardise the Good Friday Agreement and trade agreements. You’d have to explain how the changes to domestic legislation – the Human Rights Act – would impact on everyone’s lives. But it’s a legitimate question and choice – unlike the claim about small boats.

On the second claim, it is not clear how withdrawal would tackle small boats – and yet this is the argument which has had the most traction. Although Article 3 can and has been used to block safe third country returns, Articles 3 and 8 do not de facto prevent the UK from returning people who have been refused asylum. The Government can also (and is considering) changing the rules to allow for a different interpretation of these article rights. Whether the goal is to stop people from claiming asylum, process them offshore, return them to their home country, return them to a third country, or push back the boats towards France – the ECHR is not the primary block. It is disingenuous, if not dishonest, to tout leaving the ECHR as the solution to ending small boat arrivals or facilitating mass returns of people arriving via irregular routes. Returning people coming via these routes requires international cooperation, as we had under Dublin rules when we were part of the European Union. This is partly why the asylum backlog has soared since Brexit. Working with international partners is critical to meet the aims of reducing irregular arrivals – something that will be near impossible to do if we make ourselves an international pariah by leaving all and any treaty to which we are a signatory.

And would leaving the ECHR deter people from seeking a new life on our shores? Clearly no. The Home Office itself concludes that migrants and people seeking asylum have limited accurate knowledge about the welfare or immigration policies of destination countries². It is well proven that those seeking to come to the UK do so because of long-standing colonial ties, sharing a language and having family and friends here. That’s why you have high numbers of people from French-speaking North and West Africa seeking asylum in/migrating to France, and high numbers of people from Iraq and other Anglophone countries coming to the UK.

Withdrawal from the ECHR is a nonsense as a standalone ask. Labour MPs need to be honest that if they want to advocate for the outcomes Reform UK are calling for, it would require the UK to repeal the Human Rights Act and the Equality Act, and withdraw from a host of other treaties and agreements, including the Refugee Convention, the UN Convention Against Torture, the Council of Europe Anti-Trafficking Convention, the UN Convention on the Law

¹ Victoria Adelmant, Alice Donald and Başak Çalı, [The European Convention on Human Rights and Immigration Control in the UK: Informing the Public Debate](#) (Bonavero Institute of Human Rights Report, University of Oxford (September 2025), p. 21.

² UK Home Office Analysis and Insight (2020) [‘Sovereign Borders: International Asylum Comparisons Report’](#)

of the Sea, and the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea. This is the Reform UK platform: Labour must explain why it's a fantasy platform that would make everyone's life worse.

Options for reform

Labour politicians have responded to these calls to leave the Convention largely by accepting the criticisms. They have said that people are right to be angry, and that the system's credibility is being undermined by unpopular legal judgments. Some have also accepted the central, fallacious argument, that leaving or reforming the ECHR will help tackle the small boats crisis.

Amidst the non-stop barrage of policy announcements, there exist only two real options for reforming the Convention: reviewing the domestic application of Convention rights and issuing guidance; and going to Strasbourg to urge them to restore trust.

Any reform of the ECHR, or of our domestic policies or human rights frameworks, must be done with honesty to the public and with the Government's eyes wide open about what it will and will not achieve. The political risks should be front and centre for Number 10. The key risk is akin to David Cameron negotiating a poor, technocratic deal with Brussels, and becoming vulnerable to a clear and simple Leave argument. Presenting reforming the ECHR as a silver bullet creates an opportunity for opponents of the ECHR to subsequently turn around and declare that since all other avenues have been explored, the only one remaining is to leave altogether. The Government must be clear about what any policy action will and will not achieve.

So, what can be done? The Government could take several routes. It could focus wholly on domestic reforms, through either policy changes or new or amended legislative frameworks. The former appears to be the Government's preferred approach, with the Home Office undertaking a review into Article 8, the right to a family life. It's not unlikely that this review recommends the tightening of the application of Article 8 in immigration and criminal justice cases, with reforms leaving less room for interpretation by the courts. The former Justice Secretary, now Home Secretary, was clear in her speech to Strasbourg in June 2025 that making the application of Article 8 feel 'fair' must be the Government's priority, and that there must no longer be a perception that the law protects those who break the rules, not those who follow them. How her appointment to the Home Office will change the Government's approach, including its appetite to tweak Article 3, which prohibits torture, remains to be seen.

It is legitimate for the Government to assess how Article 8 is applied within our courts. However, to pursue this type of technical reform while not pushing back on misrepresented tribunal decisions is a dangerous path. When Theresa May used her conference speech as Home Secretary to claim that a Bolivian man could not be deported because he had a cat, the Labour response was to rightly dismiss it as 'ludicrous'. But this has not been the reaction when The Telegraph misrepresents tribunals to create a narrative that Foreign National Offenders are escaping deportation because of the quality of Albanian chicken nuggets.

In the debate over deportations being frustrated by the ECHR, it is not the numbers that are the problem, but the narratives. No amount of reform can prevent hostile chicken nugget stories. No scheme will ever be entirely effective, and it would take just one negative story in a right-wing newspaper to entirely undo anything substantive.

The second option is Strasbourg-level reform. Pursuing reform of the Strasbourg Court and system can feel like a scary road for progressives and those committed to the rule of law – especially when reforms are advanced by Giorgia Meloni and framed around asylum – but engaging proactively is something that the United Kingdom has been successful with in the past, most recently relating to rule 39 interim measures. If we support the Convention, we must embrace the ability of its signatories to adapt it. It is not plausible to suggest that any treaty is entirely perfect, or that any legal system could not be adjusted to work better. If there are pitfalls in the system, we can and should work collaboratively with our European partners to make the Convention fit for purpose, while respecting the fundamental rights it grants us.

However, Strasbourg-level reform is a slow process, likely to take years when there is relentless public pressure for fast, decisive action on migration. It requires agreement between signatories, which is far from a given. Pursuing this route will require that the Government regains control of the narrative on the ECHR and can make a strong, realistic case for why it is worth working on together and preserving.

Strong storytelling

Labour is on the back foot because it has not yet found a positive and hopeful story around migration and human rights. It has been caught up in reactive quotes and technocratic policy announcements. Defending the ECHR using rational arguments is unlikely to work, and saying that we can't leave due to practical considerations is entirely counterproductive.

The Government must make the positive, practical, everyday case for our freedoms. It needs to promote the mundane but important manifestations of our rights that flow through our daily lives. The invisible safeguards that hold off the intrusion of the state, improve the care and consideration we receive in a wide range of settings, and keep us safe and protected. The simple question that people want answered is - what does any of this actually do for me? Human rights can be invisible outside of negative stories in newspapers. Reversing that is not something that is out of reach.

Despite everything, opinion polls still show majorities in favour of staying in the ECHR,³ and pride in this country's history of taking in refugees.⁴ Effective communication around asylum still speaks to people's humanity in the way that high level arguments over frameworks do not.

Labour needs to tell us what freedom and responsibility mean. What kind of society it wants to build, what kind of relationships it wants to foster in communities, what promises the state can make to people, what promises we can make to each other. As the ECHR reaches its 75th birthday, we need

³ More in Common, fieldwork 22-24 July 2025

⁴ More in Common on behalf of the Refugee Council, fieldwork 10-20 January 2025

fewer lofty appeals and history lessons, and more practical appeals to how it benefits each of us. No more placidly accepting misrepresentations or being too dogmatic; we should be robust in our defence of the Convention, but straightforward about what that entails. In other words: not why we can't leave, but why we must stay.

This Place Matters: Reimagining community cohesion in Britain



Marc Stears & Marc Le Chevallier¹

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When riots engulfed some parts of England in the summer of 2024, the question of how communities across our country live together in a spirit of tolerance and togetherness, rather than distrust and division captivated the nation's attention. This summer, as flags have been draped over motorway bridges, daubed on roundabouts and, in the worst cases, painted on other people's private property, debate has raged again. Over the course of both years, these tensions set the vital context within which debates about migration broadly, and refugee and asylum policy in particular, took place. If Britain's multicultural society is strained, the argument goes, with even its national identity is contested, the call for ever-more restrictive policies will only get louder. Nowhere has this been more pronounced, of course, than with regards to the rhetoric around irregular migration and small boats.

Anyone interested in a calmer national conversation about migration, therefore, has a profound reason to be interested in the underlying causes of social cohesion. Fortunately, for decades now, faith groups and charities, local authority and civil society volunteers have sought to bring people together and find a shared identity. They have tackled loneliness and social isolation, worked to give people a sense of pride and belonging in their neighbourhoods and told a story of our country that is warm and welcoming to those from other parts of the world. But clearly intense problems remain. And none of the political parties in Westminster appear to have learned enough from the experience on the ground to put things right.

Ensuring political understanding of the foundations of social cohesion in a multicultural country during an age of intense polarisation and deep division is, therefore, a crucial task. But it is not one that is currently being grasped with any confidence. There is a temptation always in politics for even the most reflective of leaders to rely on gut-feeling, inherited ideology or the pressures of a now almost exclusively electronic postbag to reach their judgements,

¹ This essay draws on work from the This Place Matters project, which is a collaboration between UCL Policy Lab, More in Common and Citizens UK, generously supported by Pears Foundation and This Day.

especially when debates about immigration, identity and community life are bundled together. But these will be a poor guide to effective decision-making in this area. Our political leaders still come from overwhelmingly similar backgrounds and the activists they hear from – whether of right or left – are poor representatives of the nation’s actual views on these charged and contested issues. As such, the views being heard in Downing Street or the Leader of the Opposition’s Office or in Reform UK HQ are unlikely to be as grounded as they need to be either in high-quality evidence or in the experiences of a broad range of British people of all backgrounds.

It is for these reasons that a new coalition of actors, far beyond the usual suspects of party politics, will prove vital to any mission of discovery. To understand how Britons can live together peacefully, at worst, and in solidarity with one another, at best, we will need to hear from Britons themselves. Such knowledge can emerge through community action, such as that inspired by groups like Citizens UK, who have been working with faith leaders and local communities across the country for years now, and who have intensified those efforts after the riots. Or from charities and organisations like More in Common, who use the most compelling of opinion research methodologies to discover what people in different parts of the country really think and feel about each other and about the country that we all share.

It can also come from our distinct part of the world: academia. In recent decades, the question of how complex modern societies can maintain and promote community cohesion has become increasingly important in academic research. Sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, political scientists and others have all developed sophisticated theoretical accounts of the preconditions of a sense of connection, socially oriented behaviour and a broad sense of solidarity and belonging. Social scientists have also put many of these theories to the test, either by mapping and observing real societies over time or by conducting experiments, either in the lab or in the community at large. This combination of theoretical reflection and empirical practice should at least give our politicians a better foundation for making their judgements and deciding their course of actions.

Political appreciation of this academic work remains relatively under-developed, though, even if some has begun to resonate of late. Of all the prominent accounts of this question, none has captured more political attention than social capital theory. Famously popularized by Robert Putnam, who was recently invited to 10 Downing Street by Sir Keir Starmer, it suggests that social relationships are vital as they facilitate trust, cooperation and collective action without which it is impossible for either individuals or society at large to thrive. The essential idea is that societies which are rich in social relationships prosper in other ways. I will likely lead a safer, more prosperous and more fulfilling life when I am in regular contact with others, than if I live in a society characterized by loneliness, distrust and isolation. That, at least, is Putnam’s claim, and it has a powerful logic to it.

Early criticisms of Putnam suggested that this approach presumed that we would be better off living close to people that we are similar to, rather than to people whom we see as difference. Critics, like Harvard University’s Danielle Allen, spotted that in Putnam’s early work he appeared to prioritize so-called “bonding” relationships, where people connect with those who are most like themselves, rather than “bridging” relationships, where people meet and form

connections with those from different backgrounds, ethnicities, religions and social classes. To Allen, and others, this appeared both morally and practically problematic. Morally, because it seemed to be uncomfortable with the cultural diversity that is a fundamental part of contemporary societies. And practically, because the kinds of initiatives required to build social capital will sharply differ depending on whether it is bridging or bonding that is being developed.

Research on *bridging* relationships – where people are learning how to live effectively with people who are not like themselves – has in particular focused on the role played by shared community spaces, like local pubs, parks and community centres -- commonly referred to as “social infrastructure” -- where people might meet and mingle across social difference. Much scholarship has also focused on the ways in which social capital of this kind can erode. High levels of economic inequality are seen, for instance, to drive a wedge between different groups. At the same time, social polarization, perhaps prompted by unregulated social media, is also seen to disconnect groups, fraying the bonds which might otherwise keep people of different backgrounds in shared social situations.

In response to these anxieties, many recent academics have spent significant time exploring ways to maintain bridging connections in difficult times. Most compellingly, they have developed the idea of “contact theory”, which shows that direct intergroup interactions can reduce prejudice, improve relationships between communities, and foster mutual understanding. Certain conditions have to be met, however, to achieve this beneficial outcome, such as maintaining clear norms of equal treatment and attitudes between members of different groups, enabling ongoing cooperation rather than competition, finding active support from well-respected external authorities and working towards shared goals. Contact theory has been seen to be helpful even in some of the most difficult of social tensions. In one study in India, adolescent boys from Hindu and Muslim communities were brought together in camps for several weeks.² These camps were found to significantly reduce prejudice and increase the willingness to interact across communities. Remarkably, these connections lasted long after the initial period and appear also to have increased people’s subjective happiness.

Crucially, as is evident from the work of bodies like Citizens UK, contact theory also speaks to the work of thousands of community-led charities across the country. As explained by community leaders in Liverpool, they aim to “bring people together to show our commonality”, by “ensuring that the voices of all communities are heard, valued and empowered to drive lasting change”. Citizens UK’s work in local communities brings us to a further central idea in academic research around community cohesion: the notion that the experiences of everyday life matter more than anything on a larger or more abstract scale.

In the early 1970s, the American sociologist, Mark Granovetter, developed the theory of “weak ties”.³ It suggested that the very ordinary and often overlooked interactions we have on an everyday basis -- such as with neighbours or colleagues or people we occasionally pass on the street – often matter more,

² Ghosh, Aditi, Sayan Kundu, Matt Lowe, and Gareth Nellis. “Creating Cohesive Communities: A Youth Camp Experiment in India.” *Review of Economic Studies*, 2024.

³ Mark S. Granovetter, ‘[The Strength of Weak Ties](#)’, *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6, 1973.

or at least as much, as our most intimate or treasured relationships, such as with family and close friends. Granovetter set out to show that the people with whom we have these “weak ties” influence the economic opportunities that come our way, shape our leisure time and our sense of fulfilment and may also determine how much a sense of belonging we feel in our communities too. Later research has added to this, showing that while the quantity of these interactions matters, the quality of everyday weak ties is even more important in reducing prejudice and division.

In more recent years, Danielle Allen, has deepened this thinking further. In seminal work on what is required to keep democratic societies free and stable, Allen has insisted that we need to be more ambitious in our approach to social cohesion.⁴ The goal we desire can only be achieved, she contends, by granting far more power and agency to ordinary citizens, empowering them to forge new relationships across ethnic and social divides and trusting them to get on with it, however unsettling that may initially appear. The topdown bureaucratic structures of many modern societies render citizens passive and divided. Power-sharing is the precondition for people learning how to work together effectively, and to disagree well when they cannot.

Such an effort should also help refocus attention on the everyday and away from the empty and the grandiose. Politicians and policymakers display a tendency to overlook the everyday because they hope to discover a one-shot solution to the challenge. But a host of scholars - including the psychologist Adam Phillips, the sociologist Andrew Abbott and the literary critic Marilynne Robinson - have suggested that it is the overlooked, so-called “unforbidden” elements of everyday life that do the most to provide the tenor of social relations. Policymakers would thus be well-advised to examine what can be done to create genuinely warm, bridging interactions in resolutely ordinary settings -- on the bus, at the school gate, at the park, in the launderette - rather than to look for special occasions or national statements of value or principle.

Academia by itself, of course, can never provide the clear or final answer to how we learn to live together well. Let alone take all of the emotional heat out of one of the most contested issues of our time. But this analysis does provide the potential path forward. Cohesion strategies must begin with the people themselves. We must all partner with and empower those already working on the ground to reinforce everyday ties. We must also not lose heart. Ultimately, the inherent everydayness of the determinants of community cohesion means that it can never be a fixed condition. It is rather an emergent feature that needs to be continually nurtured and sustained by ordinary citizens. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity, though. For while cohesion can worsen, there is never a point of no return when it can no longer be recovered. By investing in everyday ties and empowering local community leaders, policymakers and civil society leaders can always mend and strengthen community cohesion. Respecting and valuing home-grown local organisations and networks has the power to address the challenges of how we properly scale our response to community tension and isolation, and reshape the context of our debates about who belongs in Britain. By placing ourselves on the side of those who are trusted and respected in everyday life on the ground, we see the capacity to build on what works within communities, people who are working to get by and get along.

⁴ Danielle S. Allen, [‘Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown v. Board of Education’](#), University of Chicago Press, 2004.

II. The tools for renewal: Fixing the system

The future of asylum: Can politics deliver



Sunder Katwala

Sunder Katwala is Director of British Future and co-author of 'What could actually stop the boats? Bringing control and compassion back to the UK asylum system'.

In this era of low trust in governments to deliver change, asylum can look like the most intractable issue of all. Several years of failure to deliver on high profile pledges to 'stop the boats' saw trust in the competence of the UK government on immigration collapse to new lows before the last General Election. The Labour government has struggled to reverse that perception during its first year in office, with a new Home Secretary now challenged to deliver on asylum and address an existential risk to the government itself.

The summer of 2025 demonstrated Nigel Farage's confidence that the populist right can drive the politics of asylum - and the uncertainty of his political opponents about how to respond. The initial choice was to focus a critique on delivery - to argue primarily that Farage's proposals were unworkable in practice rather than to make the principled case against an argument to effectively abolish asylum and refugee protection entirely.

Those exchanges illuminate why stronger delivery will be both necessary, but insufficient, for an effective progressive response on asylum policy and politics.

Delivery will matter for the simple reason that a social democratic government is much less likely to secure a public hearing if those in power - with the responsibility to act now - can not demonstrate that they have workable solutions of their own, not just critiques of opposition politicians offering simplistic solutions.

Yet critiques about the limits of 'deliverism' in electoral politics can apply particularly strongly to immigration and asylum. If public perceptions differ sharply from actual trends, then statistical evidence of progress can certainly not deliver any automatic political rewards. There is a sharper partisan polarisation over immigration than any other public issue. That partly reflects a significant contrast in views over just how much priority should be given to the issue. Yet it also reflects a clash of underlying principles about what a democratic government should be trying to achieve on asylum.

So "what works" depends on a prior question: delivery of what? The key to a progressive response depends on articulating what an orderly, humane and compassionate approach to asylum would look like - and demonstrating how those principles can be delivered in practice.

As the contributions to this collection demonstrate, there are many dimensions to delivering a controlled and managed system of asylum: the key to public consent to deliver is to show how they will end the visible lack of control in the

Channel and the use of hotel accommodation which symbolises and amplifies locally the expensive failure to get grip on making asylum work at home too.

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

It is six years this Autumn since Home Secretary Priti Patel pledged to halve boat crossings within weeks before eliminating them to become a 'rare occurrence' by the Spring of 2020. Yet the numbers quadrupled in 2019, quadrupled again in 2020, tripled in 2021 and rose sharply to a new peak in 2022. Numbers dipped in 2023 for the first time - as a surge from Albania was reversed - but there was a new peak in 2024. The numbers for the first eight months this year are higher still. The language of stopping the boats, then smashing the gangs has kept escalating - but the crossings kept going up.

Rishi Sunak was, by instinct, a technocrat. He had been sceptical of the Rwanda scheme's legality, practicality and cost, so had limited its scale and funding as Chancellor of the Exchequer. Yet he staked his credibility as Prime Minister on making it work. In declaring that nobody who arrived without permission would ever get to stay, Sunak was bluffing. His bluff got called as 50,000 more people arrived. Even if Rwanda had been operationalised, its capacity and scale meant it was a distraction, not a deterrent, with no answer as to what would happen in 99% of cases. The irony was that a government which had cleared the legacy backlog it inherited by finding ways to accelerate claims, rapidly rebuilt an enormous backlog once it simply ceased to process asylum claims for its final years. That was how the lack of control in the Channel became exacerbated by the extensive use of hotel accommodation, a disastrous policy which could almost have been designed to increase and amplify locally the chaos and cost of a broken asylum system.

So there are lessons of failure as to what does not deliver. If rhetorical toughness about thinking the unthinkable or passing law after law to ban asylum claims did deter, Johnson and Sunak would have stopped the boats.

Ramping up the salience of asylum while failing to find any effective way to deliver 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 that political failure was ultimately a product of the failure to find a strategy to deliver.

Asylum protest, policy and politics: understanding public attitudes

Protests about asylum hotels present a picture of public hostility to asylum seekers. Yet they tell only one part of the story about how the public think about asylum - and what they want to see delivered. British public attitudes towards asylum seekers and refugees are not irredeemably hostile.

Most people do believe in the core principle of protecting refugees.

The Ipsos annual global survey found 70% support for people fleeing war and persecution being able to claim sanctuary in 2025, including in Britain¹. This annual comparative series suggests the British public have never been more pro-refugee than in 2022 and 2023 - when support spiked to 80% and

¹ Ipsos, [World Refugee Day: Public Attitudes Towards Refugees](#), June 2025

84%. While governments struggled with small boats, empathy with Ukrainian refugees trumped that for a time, before Channel crossings came to dominate attention again.

A sixth to a quarter of people are rejectionists on refugee protection. One in five reject the basic principle in 2025, and declare ‘no sympathy at all’ for those who attempt to cross the Channel in small boats. The rejectionists would call them “illegals”, not asylum seekers. This segment would feel fewer qualms about the UK tearing up the Refugee Convention or any other human rights treaty. Most of those protesting outside hotels - up to 20,000 people in total across several weeks this summer - are from this rejectionist quarter.

Another fifth of the public are ‘compassion first’ humanitarians - who declare they have a ‘great deal’ of sympathy for people crossing the Channel, and who want to see a shift in focus from deterrence to how to provide safe passage for those seeking to make an asylum claim.

Yet even on this polarised issue, most people are balancers. The ‘balancer middle’ is unpersuaded by the rejectionist case for ditching the principle of refugee protection, yet finding the humanitarian argument for a shift in focus from border control to welcoming refugees unconvincing and incomplete if the argument is not for more control as well as more compassion.

The politics of asylum becomes a deadlocked stalemate when control is pitted against compassion. The public are equally divided on whether what matters most is how people arrived, or whether their claim is genuine. Two-thirds of those who vote centre-left want to know primarily about the validity of the claim, so that being a genuine refugee trumps how people got here. Two-thirds of the right have the opposing intuition: that being uninvited matters more, even if that means rejecting genuine claims.

Different parties have different political challenges. Reform’s 2024 vote of 14% was dominated by the rejectionist quarter - though becoming a credible contender for power means targeting more mainstream swing voters. The Labour electoral coalition includes few rejectionists: it is a broadly even mix of humanitarians and balancers, including a significant segment of socially conservative voters who prioritise control but who would not want to tear up the treaties and resume from the core principle. The crucial implication is that Labour can only make the politics of asylum work if it can offer a combination of control and compassion: in a multi-party political system, it will struggle to maintain the breadth of support it needs on two flanks if it ends up having to choose between them. Delivering an orderly, workable and humane system is a political imperative.

Dangerous journeys across the Channel should be nobody’s idea of control or compassion. The Starmer government has focused on border security to ‘smash the gangs’. The difficulty is that an enforcement only policy becomes a game of ‘whack-a-mole’: Anglo-French cooperation can impede half of attempts to cross, but most people try several times. Policing and prosecutions can smash one gang, but the barriers to entry are low if there is not a focus on smashing the business model of this lucrative trade too.

What could actually work?

The Starmer-Macron deal and new Treaty of July 2025 opens a new phase of UK-French cooperation. An initial pilot scheme may begin by removing 50 people a week - about 2,500 a year. Since this is just one in seventeen people crossing the Channel, the early phases of the pilot are unlikely to significantly reduce numbers, or disrupt the smugglers’ business model, since most people would know this is unlikely to happen to them.

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 could operationalise a returns guarantee: that could reduce crossings by 75% and provide a path to closing down the irregular route as a viable way to claim asylum in Britain.

Given the public’s prioritisation of control over numbers, a bold goal to reduce boat crossings by 75% can make the controlled routes case for increased legal admissions to secure a returns guarantee from European partners. Such an agreement can broaden political and public consent by getting the detail right. Comprehensive security and criminal checks; a monthly cap on arrivals; admissions priority to those most in need; and the potential to weigh up family ties and those with community sponsorship support can all make a difference to both the practical success and political viability of the policy.

What would success look like?

Fast forward to the Spring of 2029: what argument would a centre-left government want to make about delivery on asylum?

It would be an argument about results: small boat crossings down significantly, by three-quarters or more, once the returns guarantee had closed the uncontrolled Channel route. The business model of the smuggling gangs smashed, with the controlled routes that allowed those with valid claims to be carefully vetted, before being welcomed by community sponsors. Integration assistance unlocking the full contribution of refugees to the society. Finally, returns of those whose claims failed would be up too, again in an orderly and safe way.

So this would also be a principled argument about means as well ends. A Labour argument that believed in sovereign control of borders and welcoming our fair share of refugees too - in ways that reflect British values and interests.

That case for what control and compassion could deliver offers a sharp contrast with the failure of the previous government - or the populist prospectus of Reform to scrap asylum entirely. The route to delivery runs through cooperation not isolation - by respecting international obligations, rather than ripping up every treaty; by Britain playing its part in protecting those seeking freedom from persecution, rather than sending people back to the torturers that they had fled; and ensuring that citizens and communities were heard and engaged, securing public consent and pride in how the doubters that were proved wrong.

If the policy and political challenge of delivery seems daunting, the challenge is also to save the foundational principles of Britain playing its part in refugee protection from the pressures of populism in polarised times. What needs to be delivered is the choice not to end asylum, but to renew it, and rebuild democratic confidence in how to make refugee protection work in principle and practice.

Lemons into lemonade: How to get out of asylum hotels while easing the temporary accommodation crisis



Kate Wareing & Bethany Eckley

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What is the problem we want to solve?

At the top of Shabana Mahmood’s in-tray as the new Home Secretary will be the difficult question of how the government can get out of asylum hotels. In June this year, Chancellor Rachel Reeves promised to end the use of asylum hotels by the end of this Parliament¹ but after another summer of discontent, they don’t have another four years to find and deliver an exit strategy.

Hotels have become a divisive flashpoint in many communities up and down the UK, with an emboldened far-right fanning the flames. Symbolic of the dysfunction associated with the asylum system, hotels are no good for local communities, no good for the public purse and no good for those seeking asylum. This is a problem that will require urgent and creative thinking, and political courage, to solve.

The explosion in the use of hotels to temporarily accommodate asylum seekers cannot be seen in isolation. The UK is in the middle of a housing crisis. As a result of the lack of affordable homes, over 1.3 million people are on waiting lists for council or housing association homes² and more than 169,000 children are living in temporary accommodation,³ much of which is of poor quality and completely unsuitable. Costs of paying for temporary accommodation are spiralling as what was once truly short-term accommodation becomes increasingly long-term. There are simply not enough affordable homes for people to move out to.

This housing crisis has long-term impacts on families, and it is shaping the way people view accommodating asylum seekers too, with concerns that there is just not enough housing to go around.

¹ Chancellor Rachel Reeves MP, [Spending Review 2025 speech](#), 11 June 2025

² MHCLG, [Live tables on rents, lettings and tenancies](#), Gov.uk, updated June 2025.

³ MHCLG, [Statutory homelessness in England: January to March 2025](#), Gov.uk, 31 July 2025.

Between local authorities and the Home Office, we estimate that over £8 million is spent every night on both hotel rooms for asylum seekers, and bed and breakfast accommodation for homeless households. Hotels and B&Bs that are now “home” to thousands of people for years.

If it is prepared to be bold, the government can address both these challenges together. Rather than spending billions on short-term solutions that profit only the private providers, the government should be investing this money in long-term solutions for the benefit of communities.

A new capital fund - redirecting funds currently spent on hotels - could provide local authorities and housing associations with grant funding to enable local authorities to buy and refurbish homes which could then be rented out as temporary accommodation, initially for asylum seekers but longer-term for other homeless households.

This costed solution would allow the government to put a stop to the millions of pounds going to private providers in profit and instead leave a legacy of thousands of long-term homes, which communities desperately need.

The fund would need to sit alongside other measures which address the backlog of asylum cases and also develop a more coordinated cross-government approach to procuring temporary accommodation.⁴ We also recognise the challenging optics of providing accommodation for asylum seekers while so many families are in desperate need of housing. Arguably, however, the optics of accommodating asylum seekers in hotels is even worse. Our proposal shows how these issues can - and we would argue must - be addressed together, redirecting money that by law must be spent on accommodating asylum seekers to the long-term benefit of communities.

What is the situation?

The national government has a duty to house asylum seekers whilst they wait for a decision on their application. It is right that the government supports and accommodates people while they wait for a decision on their asylum claim, as they would otherwise be destitute and homeless. It would be better for people to be accommodated in houses or flats, but a lack of dispersal accommodation and an increase in the numbers of people awaiting determination of their asylum claim, has led to a situation where around a third of asylum seekers (32,059 people, as of the end of June 2025)⁵ are now housed in contingency accommodation in hotels. This reliance on hotels is cripplingly expensive - costing £2.1 billion between April 2024 and March 2025.

Local authorities also have a duty to provide temporary accommodation for people experiencing homelessness, which is also challenging for local government to deliver on, due to the shortage of affordable housing in England. The sharp increase in the demand for temporary accommodation has forced many local authorities to rely heavily on nightly paid accommodation, such

⁴ This was one of the conclusions of a recent Treasury committee [Value for Money investigation into temporary accommodation provision](#), 19 June 2025.

⁵ Home Office, [Accredited official statistics: How many cases are in the UK asylum system?](#), 21 August 2025

as hotels and B&Bs, to accommodate homeless families and children.⁶ Many of these homeless families and children will end up stuck in these hotels and B&Bs for long periods of time. The cost of temporary accommodation is at record levels – reported as £2.29 billion in 2023-24 – and is even threatening the financial viability of some local authorities.⁷

The fact that different parts of government are tasked with procuring short-term accommodation for different cohorts of people means that they are often competing for the same accommodation at a local level. This competition, and the extremely limited coordination between public sector bodies, causes prices to rise even further.⁸

The cost of this failure to provide appropriate short-term accommodation for those in need is not just financial. It is also counted in the psychological, social and health impacts on people – including thousands of children – living in poor quality temporary accommodation, often for years at a time. It is counted in the understandable anger in communities about high numbers of asylum seekers housed inappropriately; and the stress for asylum seekers of living in poor conditions or hostile situations. Indeed, the only beneficiaries of this failure are the private sector suppliers that are making record profits.⁹

The government has made building 1.5 million new homes a key priority for this parliament, which in the long term will help to turn this chronic situation around. But action is needed sooner, and the spend on hotel accommodation provides the government with an opportunity.

We propose the creation of a new capital fund providing local authorities and housing associations with grant funding. This would be a redeployment of current hotel spending, which comes out of the ODA budget and otherwise couldn't be spent on general use temporary accommodation. This new grant funding, combined with borrowing, would enable local authorities to buy and refurbish homes which could then be rented out as temporary accommodation.¹⁰

Our modelling shows that the grants required are modest: the average grant required for local authorities in England to purchase a three-bedroom property and break even is just £85,796 – assuming that it is rented out at Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates, and is on an interest only repayment basis (with an interest rate of 5.4%).

6 UK Parliament, [England's Homeless Children: the crisis in temporary accommodation](#), April 2025

7 Centre for Homelessness Impact, [Spending on Temporary Accommodation: is it value for money?](#), October 2024

8 HM Treasury, [Office for Value for Money: procuring short-term residential accommodation](#), June 2025

9 The NAO reported that the three companies providing asylum accommodation made a combined profit of £383m on their contracts between September 2019 and August 2024. See BBC, [Asylum accommodation costs set to triple, says watchdog](#), 7 May 2025.

10 Our [original paper](#) at SOHA sets out this model in more detail. The numbers in this article have been updated, August 2024.

What is the solution?

With an estimated average spend per person per year for hotel accommodation of £62,050¹¹ compared to an average LHA cost per person per year of £3,888, this model predicts average savings of £58,162 per person per year and £174,485 per three-bedroom property per year¹².

This means that if the current government revenue funding spent on contingency hotels were to be converted to grants for local authorities and housing associations to purchase properties which were then rented out at LHA rates, the average payback periods for those grants would be startlingly low at 0.47 years, or just under six months.

We have also run the model based on the purchased properties being rented out at Social Rent levels, which are lower than LHA. Whilst the grants required are larger (an average of £201,624 per property) and pay back periods longer (at 1.1 years), this approach would still deliver homes that would break even in the long term.

If we compare our proposed approach with the cost of dispersal accommodation rather than contingency hotel accommodation, it is still beneficial. With average per person per year costs of asylum dispersal accommodation of £9,855,¹³ pay back periods at LHA rates would be 5.4 years and at Social Rent levels would be 7.5 years.

Combined with borrowing, a capital fund of £1bn could enable the purchase and renovation of around 11,000 homes to be let at Local Housing Allowance rates.

This intervention, building on the precedent set by the Local Authority Housing Fund, could reduce and ultimately end the use of expensive and poor-quality hotels by expanding the supply of affordable, decent alternatives.

There are three huge benefits from this approach:

- It enables homes to be added to the nation's long-term supply of homes, to be used as either temporary or ultimately permanent accommodation
- After the initial six months, it could save the Home Office £1 billion per year compared to current hotel spend (based on the acquisition of 11,000 homes
- It removes competition for current private rental homes from local markets

This model relies on properties being available for refurbishment or purchase. There are a variety of sources that properties could be purchased from:

Where would these homes come from?

11 According to the [Migration Observatory](#), in 2024/25, the average daily cost of housing an asylum seeker in a hotel can be estimated at the equivalent of £170 per person, 15 August 2025.

12 Assuming one person per bedroom in a three bedroom house

13 According to the [Migration Observatory](#), in 2024/25, the average daily cost of housing an asylum seeker in 'other' accommodation can be estimated at the equivalent of £27 per person, 15 August 2025.

- **Empty properties could be brought back into use.** Examples include properties in blocks of flats where the cost of bringing blocks up to modern standards currently exceeds the future rental yield a local authority or housing association could charge for those homes, making them uneconomic to bring back in to use.
- **Open-market purchase.** There are currently over 900,000 homes listed for sale on Rightmove. Whilst care would need to be exercised over which properties were acquired where, 11,000 homes could easily be bought across England without distorting local housing markets.
- **Unsold s106.** Builders are obliged to sell a proportion of their homes for social housing to meet their planning obligations, and are increasingly reporting it being hard to find buyers for some of these sites. Whilst there are often good reasons for these properties being unappealing purchases, this also provides an opportunity for possible bulk purchases of new properties.
- **Housing association disposals.** Housing associations are increasingly looking at the costs of retrofitting their older homes as they move towards the decarbonisation of their housing stock. Given the high costs of retrofit for many homes, these homes are increasingly being disposed of on the open market as future rental income will not cover the future costs of retrofit and ownership.

What is needed to deliver this change?

A change from a revenue spend model to a grant-funded acquisitions model requires a variety of different contributions:

- **Political will** to move from a revenue model to a capital funding model. This would break even in six months compared to hotel spend, but requires political courage. This money funds the gap between rental yield and purchase costs, including debt repayments. Homes England would be best placed to distribute the grant, at least in the short term, as this is a role they already undertake.
- **Organisations with financial capacity to take on the new borrowing required** to purchase these homes. This could be local authorities, housing associations, for-profit housing associations or private sector providers, including those investing pension fund money. There are opportunities to align the need to take on new debt with the government’s thinking about how to make low-cost loans available¹⁴ for new homes, helping to address viability constraints.
- Councils or housing associations who already deliver housing **management and repairs services** would be able to manage temporary accommodation homes. They are already skilled at working with **specialist support services** who could be separately contracted by the Home Office as required to provide specialist support, integration and legal advice services for example.

14 MHCLG Citizen Space, [Low-interest Loans - Registered Provider Survey](#), Accessed September 2025.

- Local authorities currently hold the responsibility for finding temporary housing for people in their areas, and for running housing allocation waiting lists for permanent affordable housing in their areas. They would be well placed to support the Home Office to **manage allocations and occupancy** of homes in their areas. Regional mayors could be well placed to **plan for where properties should be acquired** in their areas.
- An understanding of the change, and **willingness to be flexible to ensure effective management of temporary accommodation alongside permanent homes**. This would require close work with, for example, the Regulator of Social Housing and MHCLG to ensure regulation and rent setting were flexible enough to adjust to change in use of properties in the future.

How can Labour change this?

While the value for money argument is strong, a shift in approach is needed to deliver.

First, political courage is needed. The optics of buying homes to temporarily accommodate asylum seekers are challenging if done in the wrong way, and rightly so given the depth of the housing crisis being experienced in many communities. This is why this proposal seeks to solve both issues simultaneously: by delivering an increased number of affordable homes for both temporary and long-term future use by all homeless households, as the asylum backlog falls.

Second, fix the current division of responsibilities across both central government departments and local government for sourcing temporary accommodation that makes a strategic, long-term approach to this issue harder. This is hard to solve, but a recent Treasury Value For Money review has proposed ways forward.

Limited capacity for local councils and housing associations to take on new debt is a real constraint, but a solvable one either through debt structuring within the government’s fiscal rules and/or seeking forms of private investment.

Whilst there are risks in acting, the current system is outrageously expensive and wasteful, and plays no part in the government’s mission to deliver a decade of national renewal. In a fiscally constrained operating environment, the financial prize here alone should make this worth time and effort to make happen. There is also harm in not acting – harm to community cohesion and to all those housed in hotels, both asylum seekers and other homeless households.

With decisive and bold political action, the need to exit hotels can be used as an opportunity to begin to build a more rational, long-term approach to the provision of temporary accommodation, recognising that the need for good quality accommodation for those experiencing housing crisis will be at least medium-term. And as numbers of people requiring temporary accommodation hopefully reduce in the future as other policy measures take effect, we will have created a legacy of thousands of additional affordable rental homes, available as a secure foundation for people’s lives in their communities across the country.

Lessons for the UK from the US on immigration policy and politics



Frank Sharry

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In 2024, the United States achieved a breakthrough at its southern border. After years with record migrant numbers - over two million arrivals annually - the Biden-Harris administration oversaw an 81% drop in unlawful border crossings.¹ From December 2023 to December 2024, asylum seeker crossings between ports of entry dropped from 249,785 to 47,330.²

It turns out a centre-left government can sharply reduce irregular migration without adopting harsh or authoritarian measures.

The US and UK face different challenges. The US deals with a vast land border and much larger flows than the Channel crossings into Britain. Still, both countries have struggled with overloaded asylum systems, organised smuggling networks, public loss of confidence and political attacks from right-wing populists. There is much to learn from both the stumbles and successes of the Biden-Harris team.

Three Pillars of the US Policy Success

1. Cooperate with neighbours

The cornerstone of the US breakthrough was a strong partnership with Mexico. By 2024, Mexico authorised the return of third-country nationals turned away by the US and increased efforts to disrupt smuggling. In exchange, Mexico requested expanded legal routes into the US.

Britain faces a similar test. Channel crossings can only be solved through deep, ongoing cooperation with France and the EU. Without shared management of arrivals and returns, no solution at scale is possible.

2. Protect refugees, reduce asylum pressures

Thwarted by Republicans in Congress,³ Biden issued an Executive Order in mid-2024. Migrants caught crossing the border unlawfully were

¹ U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) [December 2024 Monthly Update](#)

² U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) [December 2023 Monthly Update](#); U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) [December 2024 Monthly Update](#)

³ The American Immigration Council, [What Is the 'Bipartisan Border Bill' and How Would It Change the US Immigration System?](#), November 2024

quickly deported to Mexico or back home, with exceptions for the most vulnerable. At the same time, the US expanded refugee and humanitarian visas.

This balance is crucial for the UK. International law protects those fleeing persecution. By supporting regional safe havens and opening managed legal routes for refugees, receiving nations can uphold humanitarian obligations *and* control borders.

3. Expand safe routes

The US began issuing humanitarian visas for people from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, capped at 30,000 per month. Those vetted and admitted were placed with community sponsors - not in holding centres or hotels. These routes contributed to a 91% drop in unlawful crossings from these four source nations.⁴ Additional routes were expanded for refugees vetted and approved from abroad and for those applying for a capped number of appointments at border points of entry.

Overall, the legal slots totalled 77,000 a month and eventually produced monthly reductions of 200,000 unlawful arrivals.

Why did this approach work? The strategy⁵ shifted the incentives. Migrants saw irregular entry meant fast removal and a future ban, while legal routes offered a genuine, if limited, path to a new life. As migrants turned toward official channels, smuggling networks saw business collapse.

Two implications for Labour

1. Act early and deliver results

President Biden avoided bold action on immigration until it was too late to make a political difference. The late policy success was viewed by swing voters as an election-year stunt. Labour must show real results - and early enough, to rebuild trust and blunt populist attacks.

2. Go big or go home

In 2023, a more timid version of Biden's 2024 strategy in the US fell woefully short. In 2024, however, big increases in legal routes coupled with immediate returns brought dramatic reductions in unlawful entries. This strongly suggests that Labour will need to be bolder in implementing the UK-France agreement.

To dry up demand for smugglers and incentivise legal routes, the British Future think tank recommended Labour set a goal of reducing boat arrivals by 75% in a year, and ramp up legal admissions by a ten to twentyfold scale-up (to 25,000 or even 50,000 annual legal slots) to achieve that goal⁶. Once crossings drop, fewer legal slots will be needed to maintain high return rates.

⁴ U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) [December 2024 Monthly Update](#)

⁵ Migration Policy Institute, [With New Strategies At and Beyond the US Border, Migrant Encounters Plunge](#), October 2024.

⁶ Sunder Katwala and Frank Sharry, British Future, [How we can actually stop the boats](#), September 2025

America as
Cautionary Tale

The US offers a clear warning for those determined to thwart the rise of radical right-wing parties. Back in office, Trump has ignored international obligations, effectively ended asylum, shut down most legal channels, and launched a controversial campaign to deport a million immigrants this year. His overarching goal is to do something that is unprecedented in modern America: mass deportations leading to net negative migration.

This is not what the American people want.⁷ Beyond Trump’s hardcore base of some 20%, the majority of Americans are pro-immigration and anti-chaos.⁸ They want a combination of control and compassion.⁹ But here we are. Trump’s immigration crackdown is the tip of the authoritarian spear, with masked agents snatching immigrants off the streets, troops patrolling cities, and arbitrary removals to foreign gulags. America’s democracy is on a knife’s edge.

The policy lessons from America are clear: combine strong international cooperation, real consequences for irregular entry, and expanded legal pathways. The political lesson is also clear: act boldly and deliver results in time to thwart radical populists intent on weaponising migration in their pursuit of power.

⁷ Gallup, [Surge in U.S. Concern About Immigration Has Abated](#), 11 July 2025

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ More in Common, [The Priority Gap: Insights on the 2024 Election Outcome](#), 28 November 2024

Fix the system or change the system:
International lessons on making asylum fit
for purpose



Meghan Benton and Susan Fratzke

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The government is at a crossroads in its asylum system following a summer of unrest. As Reform UK publishes its plans for mass deportation, and senior Labour figures have questioned Britain’s future relationship to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), the government is grappling with how to signal control to anxious publics, while staying true to its humanitarian principles. But it would also do well to stay the course on efforts to improve the functioning of the asylum system, in a policy area where operational efficiency is king.

The UK is not alone in its asylum issues. Across much of the high-income world, spiralling asylum backlogs have triggered a domino effect of negative consequences. Backlogs keep people in a state of limbo, delaying integration and locking genuine refugees out of timely protection. People end up in the country for longer, making it harder to deport people with rejected claims. This further bolsters incentives for disorderly, highly visible irregular movements—especially maritime—that publics hate. Emergency housing and burgeoning asylum hotel costs are an especially poisonous tip of a bigger iceberg.

Experiences abroad offer a range of lessons on ways to fix the existing system—from fast-track processing to reforming appeals to ramping up the use of AI to speed up decision-making. At the same time, there may also be merit in considering a more radical reset, to break the perverse incentives that in-country asylum processing creates in the first place. Specifically, the time may have come to examine what can be done away from the UK’s territory through progressive ‘externalisation’. The government will need to draw on innovation from all angles, while balancing control signalling with the competence and compassion that is the hallmark of liberal democracies.

Fixing the system
- A new toolbox
or fiddling at the
seams?

Asylum systems work well when they are “fast, fair, and final”. But delivering on that slogan has become more complicated over time, especially as refugee arrivals have mixed with other migrants making it hard to clearly distinguish between who is a refugee and who is not, the sources of displacement (war, gang violence, climate change, economic collapse etc) have grown, and the role of organised smuggling gangs has escalated.

In response, governments across high-income countries have turned to new approaches, from expediting processing for certain groups to looking for ways to externalise asylum procedures. The result has been an avalanche of innovations that have transformed asylum procedures, although many have also generated legal pushback. The rise of generative AI poses yet another potential gamechanger that could usher in new tools to handle critical steps like document or country of origin verification resulting in significant gains in processing times.

These experiments from the last decade offer several lessons for the UK:

1. Case triaging can speed up processing

Across Europe, many countries have moved towards adopting different procedures for different types of cases, with the result of speeding up procedures on average. In many ways, this is just basic queuing theory: families with prams take longer to check-in at airports than frequent flyers. In asylum, the aim is to identify cases that can be addressed quickly and move these into a separate queue lowering the average wait for everyone.

The UK government has hinted at an intention to create a fast-track process alongside the main asylum system. Under the previous government, the Home Office had implemented a pilot Streamlined Asylum Processing (SAP) program for citizens of six countries who had submitted applications prior to March 2023; the pilot allowed these applications to be processed on the basis of a questionnaire, rather than an interview.¹ International examples suggest that expanding this pilot to include more recent arrivals and nationalities could have dramatic results. In Switzerland, asylum seekers are triaged into Dublin cases², straightforward cases (which are prioritized), and complex cases. Procedures for straightforward cases now conclude in an average of 93 days including any appeals, compared to 500 days under the old system.³

To deliver on these time savings, it is important to think through which steps could be streamlined, operational capacity implications, and appropriate legal safeguards.

1 Migration Observatory, ‘The UK’s Asylum Backlog’. The nationalities included in the pilot were Afghanistan, Eritrea, Libya, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen.

2 A “Dublin case” refers to an asylum application in the EU (or associated states) where the responsible country for examining the claim must be determined under the Dublin system (now revised by the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation (AMMR), part of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum). Responsibility usually falls to the EU member state of first entry (identified through Eurodac fingerprinting), but can also be based on family ties, visas issued, or other criteria. If another country is found responsible, the applicant may be transferred there, unless humanitarian or legal reasons prevent it.

3 Swiss Government, Asile : les procédures accélérées fonctionnent globalement bien ; des améliorations ont été réalisées ou sont en cours de réalisation.

Most often, it is “manifestly founded” cases, i.e. those that are clearly in need of protection like women and girls from Afghanistan, who are diverted into a separate stream. These cases may be given lighter touch processing, like omitting an interview, that allows them to proceed more quickly. Alternatively, more complex cases might be taken out of the mainstream pipeline and assigned to teams with specialised skills, allowing the rest of the cases to proceed more quickly.⁴ Using simplified procedures to speed up manifestly unfounded cases—i.e. cases that are deemed to be unlikely to succeed—has, however, proved to be legally tricky. Few countries have tried to do so given international law generally requires countries to guarantee an individual assessment of a person’s risk of refoulement.⁵ Canada, for example, attempted to introduce fast-track processing and limit appeals for manifestly unfounded cases. But this was found by the courts to violate key legal principles, and Canada abandoned the scheme and now focuses on fast-tracking only manifestly founded cases.⁶

It’s worth noting that this approach works best where it actually makes changes to case processing and flow, (e.g. cutting out steps or improving the transition between stages of the process). Agreeing faster processing deadlines alone will not work. This is a problem facing the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, which will funnel people from countries with asylum recognition rates of under 20 percent into expedited “border procedures” with faster processing deadlines. Governments need to adjust processes, not just targets.

2. Co-locating infrastructure in the same site can speed up processes and facilitate early legal advice

In the ideal world, reception provides not only accommodation, but parallel services that can hurry along asylum claims and link claimants up with advice about their prospects—whether that means protection in the UK or returning home.

For instance, Germany’s AnKER reception centres brought together all authorities and actors in the asylum process, and provided accommodation for asylum seekers. It resulted in modest gains (65 days versus 70 from interview to decision), but fewer cases got stuck for lengthy periods of time. They also increased the likelihood that unsuccessful claimants returned home voluntarily, thus promoting a more humane approach to enforcement.⁷ And in Switzerland, co-locating accommodation, registration, interviews, legal representation and health checks under one roof in its Federal Asylum Centres model resulted in fewer hand-offs between agencies, faster fact-finding and better-prepared interviews, as well as reducing subsequent appeals rates.

4 UNCHR, ‘Effective processing of asylum applications: Practical considerations and practices’, March 2020.

5 The principle of “non-refoulement” “provides that no one shall expel or return (“refouler”) a refugee against his or her will, in any manner whatsoever, to a territory where he or she fears threats to life or freedom.”

6 Brandon D Hastings, ‘Beyond Balance: Refugees and Disruption’, 29 April 2025.

7 Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, ‘Evaluation der AnKER-Einrichtungen und der funktionsgleichen Einrichtungen’. Being in an AnKER raised the probability of a voluntary return by 9 percentage points, but reduced the probability of a forced return by 5 percentage points—although over time the gap on forced returns narrowed.

Co-location also facilitates early access to legal support or returns counselling, both of which can increase the likelihood that people with rejected claims ultimately leave. A growing body of evidence from asylum systems globally suggests that the provision of free, high quality legal assistance in first instance asylum decisions can lead to better case preparation and thus higher quality decision-making and, potentially, lower rates of appeals.⁸ In the Swiss centres, early legal advice improved the relationship with NGOs and legal communities, as well as trust in the process, by allowing these stakeholders to have early access.

3. Administrative reviews can help reduce the appeals backlog, but “appeals-proofing” decisions should be the first step

Streamlining initial decision-making only works if these decisions are then final. Lengthy appeals procedures can instead lead to backlogs and end up creating an avenue to stay for individuals who otherwise would be subject to return orders.

The best way to prevent appeals backlogs from forming in the first place is to ensure decisions are unlikely to be appealed. Detailed data on appeals rates and decisions can be a useful tool here, one that AI could help to exploit. For instance, if data on appeals shows that certain decisionmakers or offices are often having their decisions overturned on appeal, or particular types of cases are often overturned, additional training can be provided to improve the quality of these decisions. In Australia, for example, the Department of Home Affairs prepares a report that examines trends in decisionmaking at the appeals level and makes recommendations for quality assurance measures that should be taken to improve initial decisions.⁹

Legal assistance can also help to reduce appeals rates. In Switzerland, a key factor in the success of the Swiss Federal Asylum Centres has been the provision of legal assistance to claimants. And in Norway, the Norwegian Organisation for Asylum Seekers (NOAS) provides free consultations to applicants on whether a case should be appealed, and only provides legal assistance for appeals in those cases.¹⁰

The second step is to streamline the appeals process itself. While appeals in the United Kingdom are heard by judicial tribunals, the government intends to create an independent adjudicator body with a 24-week deadline for appeals. Administrative reviews can typically proceed more quickly because they review only the merits of the case, not underlying legal questions. Administrative appeals can also offer the option to forgo hearings, which can be a bottleneck; Norway and Sweden for instance forgo hearings for certain types of appeals

8 See for example, evidence from Canada (Nicholas A R Fraser, ‘[More than advocates: Lawyers’ role in efficient refugee status determination](#)’), Switzerland (‘[The Swiss Asylum Procedure: A Future Model for Europe?](#)’), and the US (‘[A national study of access to counsel in immigration court](#)’ and ‘[At the Breaking Point: Rethinking the U.S. Immigration Court System](#)’).

9 Commonwealth Ombudsman, ‘[Learning from merits review: Best practice principles for agency engagement with merits review](#)’

10 NOAS, ‘[Legal aid after refusal - NOAS](#)’, Accessed September 2025.

or unless requested by the asylum seeker.¹¹ Pre-appeal administrative reviews, where case officers are asked to review the original decision in light of any new evidence before it proceeds to appeal, are another option used by Norway, Sweden and Spain.

4. AI could be a gamechanger, but there is likely a ceiling on what can be achieved through operational efficiencies

The use of technology to improve the speed or quality of first decisions has long been noted, but the tools vary from analytical to improved communication to supporting decision-making.

Some countries have begun to deploy AI and data tools that help to improve communication with applicants and thus speed up decision-making. Canada introduced an app that applicants can use to file their cases and upload materials, reducing time spent on case intake. And Norway created a chatbot that talks people through filing an asylum claim online.¹²

More recently, attention has been placed on the potential for AI to dramatically expedite the decision-making process. AI is being tested to support case summarisation and documentation/navigation tools for caseworkers. The UK Home Office evaluated two such tools in 2024¹³. Germany is using AI for dialect recognition, which helps to verify the applicant’s country of origin.¹⁴

While these innovations represent major strides in asylum processing, a fundamental question remains: are the improvements in speed and accuracy sufficient to deter unfounded claims, and relieve pressure on stressed accommodation and integration systems? And if so, could further measures that are designed to prevent access to territory (like visas or carrier sanctions) be dropped, because the system itself is filtering out spurious claims? This thought experiment functions like a litmus test. If the answer to either question is no, this suggests that policymakers may also need to look outside the asylum system itself for reforms.

While the innovations are significant, processing reforms are unlikely to resolve the fundamental tensions in asylum systems, in part because enforcing returns remains extremely difficult. For most people, stepping foot in the UK means eventual residence. This inflates incentives for irregular movement, even at huge risk and harm, and operational efficiencies can only do so much to

Changing the system - Diversion or direction of travel?

11 In Norway, appeals cases are primarily processed in writing. A case officer considers the appeal and makes a recommendation, prior to submitting it to a decisionmaker. The decisionmaker may decide to organize a hearing for complex cases where additional clarification is required. In Sweden, hearings are not required as part of the appeal but can be requested by the asylum seeker. Swedish Refugee Law Center,

12 Susan Fratzke, Meghan Benton, Andrew Selee, Emma Dorst, and Samuel Davidoff-Gore, ‘[The End of Asylum? Evolving the Protection System to Meet 21st Century Challenges](#)’, Migration Policy Institute, July 2024.

13 Home Office, [Evaluation of AI trials in the asylum decision making process](#), 29 April 2025

14 Elisabeth Späth, [AI Use in the Asylum Procedure in Germany: Exploring Perspectives with Refugees and Supporters on Assessment Criteria and Beyond](#), March 2025

resolve this fundamental calculation. Increasingly, therefore, governments are looking into models that find a way to break the connection between access to territory and people being allowed to stay, while processing or after their claim is denied.

Progressives quite understandably have a negative reaction to anything that seems like pushing responsibilities elsewhere. The UK-Rwanda deal was widely criticised for proposing to send people—without an opportunity for hearing—to a country whose human rights record was questionable. Many other partner countries, from the European and Italian cooperation on enforcement with Libya to the idea of a Dutch “return hub” in Uganda, raise similar red flags for the human rights records of their hosts or the added pressure they put on countries in the Global South.

But these models should not all be tarred with the same brush. They run the gamut from partnerships that funnel dollars to contain migrant movements to safe access to pathways along migration routes. The Safe Mobility Offices in the Americas, for instance, pioneered under the Biden administration, sought to connect would-be asylum seekers traversing Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Guatemala with screening for multiple pathways (whether labour, family or protection) in multiple countries (Canada, Spain, US – though additional countries had expressed interest before the program was folded by the Trump administration). This vision was never totally realised, although the US did refer more than 100,000 people for resettlement. Alongside this, it admitted 537,730 people from Cuba, Nicaragua, Haiti, and Venezuela through a separate digital platform, in return for Mexico agreeing to accept a commensurate number of returns.¹⁵

While many European progressives have been interested in this model, it is worth noting that it came with some heavy tradeoffs: essentially wiping out asylum at the border, heavy-handed enforcement from Mexico, and allowing the countries where SMOs were located to set the criteria for which populations were eligible for pathways—because they were concerned about SMOs acting as a magnet for new migration.

Clearly, the UK-France “one in one out” deal, which borrows from some elements of the US approach, holds promise. But there are many questions about whether it will deliver on these incredibly high stakes. If the numbers returned and selected through pathways remain small, small boats will continue to cross, and complex eligibility criteria could weigh the system down.

Instead of putting all eggs in the UK-France basket, the UK could consider exploring offshore processing while adjusting procedures to disincentivise irregular arrivals, for instance by removing everyone who arrives irregularly to a third-country location for processing, while committing to take the same number of refugees as normally apply under asylum routes through managed pathways. Exploring offshore processing in UK territories or closer to British soil, and ultimately offering protection in the UK for those with a positive adjudication, would help avoid the moral critique and legal issues that plagued UK-Rwanda.

¹⁵ Susan Fratzke, Meghan Benton, and Andrew Selee, ‘[Legal Pathways and Enforcement: What the U.S. Safe Mobility Strategy Can Teach Europe about Migration Management](#)’, Migration Policy Institute, December 2024.

Alternatively, it could consider exploring the “returns hub” idea by returning people whose asylum cases have been denied to a safe third country location, possibly even prior to appeal. This could be a multipurpose hub centre with access to legal counsel, an appeals infrastructure, information about other pathways, even training. Right now, these models are legally and diplomatically complex to achieve but if the UK partnered with other European countries it would have a better chance of success.

Ultimately, we need to be improving the system while also remaking it. All the innovations that would be appropriate for “normal” times are unlikely to break the irregular routes now that they have opened up. Rather, the pragmatic and humanitarian thing to do is to disrupt these networks - through both operational improvements and more dramatic measures--because otherwise people promoting more extreme, less rights-respecting models will do it - as the lessons from the other side of the Atlantic teach us.

Tackling the root causes of migration: What do we know about international development?



Anneliese Dodds MP

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Introduction

What is the relationship between international development and migration? Does aid reduce migration from the Global South towards the Global North, by making people more likely to stay in a growing local economy with trustworthy institutions? Or does it increase migration, as people with the appetite to move from their home country are enabled to do so by an improved economic situation? The answer to these questions is important as the Government wrestles with difficult questions around how to manage migration and develop a narrative around how it is doing so.

In his ‘shortest history of migration’, Ian Goldin suggests ‘the relationship between development and migration is complicated: migration can lead to development and development can lead to migration’¹. Certainly, for many countries the value of remittances is far greater than any international aid, and migrants sending money home can massively boost the domestic economy. And historically, there has been a broadly positive relationship between greater economic growth – which can be spurred on by development aid – and aspirations to migrate: the so-called ‘mobility transition’².

In practice though the relationship is even more complicated. Well-targeted development interventions can help reduce at least some forms of irregular migration and forced displacement. Indeed, new research indicates how targeted aid interventions can lead to positive outcomes for both the Global North and South. They can increase opportunities in origin countries, build trust in local and national institutions, and improve people’s assessment of their prospects in the future – building confidence and reducing aspirations to follow irregular migration routes. Simultaneously, aid interventions can help support people forced to flee their homes to stay in their home region, rather than having to attempt hazardous journeys across continents.

In the UK, an increasing proportion of UK Official Development Assistance (ODA) is being spent on the ‘downstream’ of migration – often, asylum seeker hotels – rather than tackling migration’s ‘upstream’ (in origin and host countries). Under OECD conventions, public spending on asylum seekers during their first

1 Ian Goldin, ‘Shortest history of migration’, 2024, p.229
2 Zelinsky, [The Hypothesis of the Mobility Transition](#), 1971

year in the UK is counted as ‘in donor refugee costs’, which is then categorised as ODA for accounting purposes. While the UK’s use of this convention is similar to many other countries, the magnitude of the spend in relation to our aid budget is significantly greater. Cuts to ODA mean that it is likely that these ‘in donor refugee costs’ will soon come to around a third of the ODA budget³.

Using ODA to reduce poverty and at the same time, ‘tackle the root causes’ of irregular migration has been debated at length in the US and EU, but less in the UK. So while a significant proportion of UK ODA now pays for the outcomes of forced displacement and irregular migration, it is critical that we consider how ODA can help reduce their drivers in the first place.

This article sets out some of the history of these debates, before examining insights from recent research. It suggests that modern solutions can avoid the pitfalls of previous approaches. To do so, however, policymakers need to differentiate between regular migration, irregular migration and forced displacement; between different forms of development assistance and their impact; between fragile and non-fragile nations; and between assistance to promote development and that to increase government security and administrative capacity. Achieving impact will require a confident approach, with clear communication of the outcomes of aid both a domestic and an international priority.

This approach is consistent with what needs to be a broader shift in aid policy, which must be more transparent about the role of aid in promoting our national interest⁴. In my view, this is not only desirable when it comes to increasing public trust, but also key for increasing the trust of leaders and citizens in Global South countries. Indeed the big question is not whether aid serves the interests of the UK as well as the world’s poorest people, but how it does this, because ‘in an era of tightening budgets, domestic contestation, and rising geopolitical fragmentation, aligning donor goals with recipient needs is not just ethically sound, it is also strategically wise’⁵.

The role and purpose of UK aid has come under increased scrutiny since the announcement by the UK government in February 2025 that it would be cut back to 0.3% by 2027. I have commented elsewhere on the implications of the cut, and why in my view it diminishes the UK’s ability to maintain our country’s security⁶, so will not rehearse these arguments here. Suffice to say that contrary to some public commentary, there has not necessarily been a ‘collapse’ in the public’s support for aid – although there are very considerable concerns about its efficacy, and about waste⁷.

The context: UK ODA and ‘root causes’

3 As while they are projected to decrease over time, this is at a slower rate than the overall cut to aid. [See FCDO evidence to International Development Committee, 13 May 2025](#)
4 Anneliese Dodds MP, ‘A new international context’ for Fabian Society, [Promising development: The future of aid in an uncertain world](#), 22 September 2025
5 Kiel et al 2025 [Working Paper: Identifying Mutual Interests](#) Kiel Working Paper
6 [Anneliese Dodds, Chatham House, Sep 2025](#)
7 Anneliese Dodds MP, ‘A new international context’ for Fabian Society, [Promising development: The future of aid in an uncertain world](#), 22 September 2025

Some development organisations have argued in this context that aid should be ‘framed’ as ‘part of a holistic global security, climate, or migration strategy that protects UK interests’ (my emphasis). The suggestion is that Brits care about migration and therefore the relevance of development can be increased for people who would not otherwise be supportive of it⁸.

Arguments around whether and how aid can influence migration are, however, hardly new⁹. Indeed, the beginnings of the so-called ‘root causes’ approach can be traced right back to debates in the United States during the 1980s and onwards, about the relationship between support for economic development and migration patterns; through the French concept of ‘co-développement’^{10 11}; to the EU’s Euro-African Conference on migration and development (2006), the 2008 European Council pact on immigration and asylum, and the creation of the Trust Fund for Africa in 2015¹².

More recently the EU’s approach has arguably been influenced by Italian attempts to sustain and increase its influence in Africa and specifically the ‘enlarged Mediterranean’, linked to Prime Minister Georgia Meloni’s approaches to migration policy and Italy’s pivotal geographical position in relation to migration flows.

Another recent development has attempted to link development support with outcomes on migration, with a new ‘conditional’ approach. Hence, the centre-right leadership of the European Commission has focused not on development per se but on making development funds conditional on origin and host-country actions on migration, with ‘African countries’ having to ‘stem migrant departures if they want to continue receiving EU development aid’¹³, with the exception of humanitarian aid¹⁴.

It is currently unclear whether this conditional approach will receive broader support within the EU’s political institutions. It comes after a controversial deal between the EU and Tunisia in 2023, which provided budget support in exchange for controlling flows of migrants across the Mediterranean – a deal which Tunisia maintained was not fully held to by Brussels¹⁵, and which was

8 [Shifting The Narrative: Public Opinion On Aid & Development In The UK - Adam Smith International](#), emphasis added

9 Hagen-Zanker, J. and Carling, J., [‘What are the ‘root causes’ of migration?’](#) MIGNEX, 7 December 2023.

10 Sami Nair, Rapport de bilan et d’orientation sur la politique de co-développement liée aux flux migratoires, mission interministérielle “Migration/Co-développement”, Ministère des Affaires étrangères, 1997

11 Khoudour-Castéras, David, 2009, [‘Neither Migration nor Development: The Contradictions of French Co-development Policy’](#), CIPI, December 2009.

12 [European Court Of Auditors, ‘Auditors step up criticism of EU migration fund for Africa’, 25 September 2024.](#)

13 Gregorio Sorgi [‘Africa must stop migrants reaching Europe to keep EU cash, plans show’](#), Politico, 9 July 2025.

14 Laura Dubois, Andy Bounds and Paola Tamma, [‘EU to use development aid to force third countries to cut migration’](#), FT, July 18th 2025.

15 [‘Tunisia hands back €60M of EU funding as migrant deal tensions soar’](#), Politico October 11, 2023

criticised by MEPs for ignoring human rights concerns¹⁶.

While all of these twists and turns have focused on the relationship between development and migration, they have used very different mechanisms, applied to different countries, and had varying degrees of ‘success’ even according to their own metrics. The next section considers what the evidence – rather than political rhetoric- suggests is likely to be successful.

Evidence beyond rhetoric

In 2018 American Economic Association researchers Michael Clemens, Ethan Lewis and Hannah Postel carried out a thorough analysis of the then-existing research examining evidence of the effectiveness of seeking to tackle the ‘root causes’ of migration through aid. They considered what they suggested were the three routes through which aid could change conditions and thus deter migration: increasing overall economic growth, creating youth jobs, and conflict resolution.

On economic growth, they argued that very significant sums would be needed - up to 10% of a recipient country’s GDP in aid - in order to achieve a 1% increase in growth¹⁷. They also suggested that, in any case, the ‘mobility transition’ – the suggestion that economic growth leads to higher levels of migration – would likely win out¹⁸.

On youth employment, they found a clear association between very high levels of youth unemployment and aspirations to migrate, but noted that the clearest engine for reducing such unemployment is growth, which would likely result in the ‘mobility transition’¹⁹. And on the prospects of aid reducing violence, they argued that ‘aid in conflict zones is more likely to exacerbate violence than to dampen violence’²⁰.

Having said all of that, they suggested that two *different* factors affect peoples’ migration aspirations: migration as a tool for investment in the family, and as a form of insurance. They acknowledged that where people can find other ways to diversify their income, including in the short-term, this can reduce aspirations to migrate.

16 Sorgi, Gregorio, [‘Parliament shouts, pounds table over ‘opaque’ Tunisia migrant deal’](#), Politico, July 18, 2023.

17 In practice, the likely reductions in GNI that some countries (eg Somalia) may see following global aid cuts are not far off such sums, so it will arguably be possible to assess such claims using the counterfactual case. Cf Centre for Global Progress, Charting the Fallout of Aid Cuts: Which Countries Will be Hit Hardest, as Multiple Donors Cut Budgets? By Sam Huckstep, Laura Granito, Sara Casadevall Bellés and Lee Crawford June 12, 2025

18 They sought to demonstrate this through a longitudinal analysis of countries that have experienced economic growth which concurrently experienced increased levels of outbound migration.

19 Albeit with rural youth more likely to have their likelihood to migrate reduced somewhat following targeted interventions

20 Of course this is the case where belligerents can take control of and misappropriate aid (predation) or seek to sabotage it. This is precisely why many UN bodies, with the expertise to avoid being drawn into sabotage or corruption, are often so critical in the front line of conflict zones.

More recent evidence: Basic services, perceived opportunities and support for refugees closer to home

And finally, they underlined that the evidence on the aggregate impact of aid is incredibly difficult to assess and appeared to point in different directions – arguing for more research specifically into this issue. Helpfully, more recent research *has* delved specifically into some of these areas.

While political use of the concept of ‘root causes’ has, as mentioned, been salient in many countries outside the UK for some time, detailed research in this area has been lacking. More recent work, using reliable, valid data, suggests a nuanced but positive picture.

First, a body of research has now developed which shows a consistent negative impact on migration aspirations and on migration flows following improvements in local amenities and basic public services²¹. Examination of outcomes following interventions by the EU Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) found a positive relationship between EUTF interventions, satisfaction in basic services, and reductions in aspirations to migrate.²²

Another major study distinguished between migration aspirations, migration capabilities and actual migration flows, examining the impact of assistance from the World Bank over a twenty year period²³. The study found that ‘the announcements and disbursements of new aid projects significantly reduce people’s migration aspirations’ – by an average of 8%, and more substantially for those under 30 than those over 30. In the year after aid disbursement, there was an average reduction of 7.8% a year in asylum seeker flows leaving an origin country. In ‘the global sample, this dampening effect on asylum-seeker flows persists for two years and then vanishes’. However, following this period, while it might be expected that aid improving living conditions would support individuals’ capability to migrate (ie the mobility transition), they found that this did not apply for *irregular* migration, and only for *regular* migration. They suggest this outcome may be due to respondents’ trust in national institutions increasing, which increases confidence in opportunities, safety and security ‘at home’, and reduces the desire to attempt risky journeys to migrate irregularly. Importantly, this study suggests the need for aid interventions and their planned outcomes to be communicated clearly – something I would suggest is critical both where ODA is spent *and* in the UK.

The studies examined above have focused on people’s aspirations to migrate from their home countries. It is also crucial to consider those who have been forced to leave their homes, who are refugees in other countries. This is particularly important given that the world is currently experiencing the largest number of people displaced since World War II.

Most people forced to flee do so within continents and indeed often within their own countries. So for example, those forced by environmental shocks to flee often do so to urban centres²⁴ rather than further afield. Nonetheless, there is a clear link between domestic population movements and long-distance refugee flows, especially when these are due to conflict and instability. It is

21 Lanati and Thiele, The impact of foreign aid on migration revisited, 2018

22 Akim, Al-Mouksit and Tobias Heidland, “The Impact of the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) on Migration Aspirations,” Working Paper, 2025

23 Kiel, Does foreign aid reduce migration?, 2023

24 Cipollina et al, Environmental migration? An overview of the literature, 2022

notable, for example, that the top ten origin countries for unaccompanied children currently coming to the UK seeking asylum include Sudan, Eritrea, Syria and Somalia. When I visited South Sudan last year, I met a number of unaccompanied children who had escaped the conflict in Sudan with only the clothes on their backs. In many cases they had seen their fathers and uncles being separated from them and forced into armed groups or killed, and their mothers, aunts and siblings dying of hunger or preventable diseases like diarrhoea or measles.

Clemens and Postel²⁵ stated that they were ‘not aware’ of direct empirical tests of development assistance to third countries hosting refugee populations. When a Minister, I was keen to push for better evidence in this area, given that the UK can be proud of its many interventions to support people who have fled conflict. I saw for myself, for example, how Syrian refugees were supported to stay in their home region (in Jordan), including through support from the UK. Other assistance from the UK has enabled Syrian refugees in Turkey to avoid economic disadvantage. We urgently need further work to understand the exact links between development support, poverty reduction and onwards migration.

Complicating factors: Fragility, and clarity on what ODA is and what its not

The extent of government fragility, and particularly the presence of armed conflict, are critical factors in the delivery of both humanitarian aid and development support. Kiel et al²⁶ note that the extent of fragility can radically impact on individuals’ migration aspirations – and that as a result, their findings do not apply in fragile nations in sub-Saharan Africa. Of course, even people who were previously not keen to migrate can change their minds when they and their families become unsafe. Again, however, the UK has a particular expertise in operating in fragile countries, one which has been recognised globally. This suggests our nation can play a critical role in developing interventions which can improve the efficacy of aid in fragile contexts.

Finally, it is worth noting that some of what has been politically discussed as dealing with ‘root causes’ does not involve ODA in the sense that it would be classified by the OECD, as it refers to supporting security apparatus - as the OECD itself has clarified²⁷. Here, Kiel et al²⁸ set out an important point underlining the importance of ODA itself. They explain that origin countries can sometimes be ‘won over’ to ensure a better relationship with destination countries, including on security matters, when they can develop a long-term partnership together, including in relation to development.

Conclusion

Generally, the debate in the UK on international development and migration has focused on only one aspect – how much ODA is spent on hotels. Obviously, the Government has committed to reducing this cost, and both the political left and right have pushed for it to do so. However, the relationship between international development and migration is more complicated than that one element.

25 Michael A Clemens, Hannah M Postel, 2018, [Deterring Emigration with Foreign Aid: An Overview of Evidence from Low-Income Countries](#), Popul Dev Rev. 2018 Oct 10;44(4):667-693.

26 Kiel et al 2025 [Working Paper: Identifying Mutual Interests](#) Kiel Working Paper

27 [Peace and security expenditures in official development assistance \(ODA\) | OECD](#)

28 Kiel et al 2025 [Working Paper: Identifying Mutual Interests](#) Kiel Working Paper

Until recently, the evidence suggested that international development was likely to increase migratory flows, if it affected them at all – but more recent work shows that appropriately formulated, targeted and communicated aid can have a dampening impact. The ‘mobility transition’ only explains part of the picture. Carefully calibrated interventions which ally with both the UK’s interests and those of people in the Global South can help people realise opportunities within their own countries. They can increase trust in domestic institutions, improving confidence in the future. They can also support refugees to remain closer to home – and the UK is well placed to develop greater evidence in this area, as well as when it comes to the delivery of aid in fragile contexts.

It is essential that a Labour government takes notice of this. First, it must improve the evidence base for what works, especially in ‘transit’ countries and fragile and conflict-affected nations. Secondly, it needs to develop interventions which tackle the ‘upstream’ of migration, rather than focusing almost all ODA spending ‘on migration’ on its ‘downstream’²⁹. Above all, using international aid effectively helps to deliver what is a basic human need, wherever people are – to be able to stay at home and get on, rather than have to get out.

29 It could be suggested that such interventions will lack cost-effectiveness. Of course, the core reason for any penny to be spent on ODA must remain the alleviation of poverty – both morally and by law. Beyond this though, it is notable that Fuchs et al (2024) and others have found that the cost of using ODA in this area is actually comparable with the costs of the processing and hosting of those seeking asylum in nations like the UK. In addition, well-targeted ODA interventions also have the merit of potentially improving, rather than worsening, the UK’s relationship with the Global South – a political and security imperative given the rise of China and Russia and of broader global instability.

Missing evidence and border enforcement



Dr Alexandra Hartman and Dr Moritz Marbach¹

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UK governments have both prioritised and struggled with managing the number of irregular migrant arrivals via small boats and, in the past, lorries. Current funding of 150 million GBP over two years finances a range of law enforcement policies, including but not limited to tougher sanctions against smugglers, disrupting the supply chains used to procure inflatable boats, and collaborative actions to stop boats from entering the water. While there is almost no credible evidence of policy impact or value for money, there are good reasons to believe that such policies result in costly unintended consequences. Do these policies reduce irregular arrivals durably and at what cost? Do these policies reduce the profits of smugglers and deter them?

All policymaking involves uncertainty about intended and unintended consequences. Consequently, policies are more likely to deliver on political commitments and solve protracted policy problems. And yet, in the United Kingdom, ideas related to evidence-informed policymaking are notably absent in the context of immigration, especially when it comes to the use of law enforcement policies to reduce irregular arrivals.

When we speak about credible evidence, we mean evidence on the causal effects of policies. Typically, such credible evidence comes from systematically collected, often but not only, quantitative, data. To isolate the causal effect of a policy, researchers compare two scenarios that differ only in that one features a policy and the other, the counterfactual, does not. Creating a plausible counterfactual typically involves (often statistical) comparisons across time, countries and groups. Credible evidence is also generated with attention to transparency and reproducibility so that other researchers can independently scrutinize how and what is learned from the evidence.

1 Acknowledgments: We would like to thank Judith Spirig for her insightful comments and the UCL Policy Lab staff, including James Baggley and Phoebe Couzens, who made the work possible, as well as the participants at the UCL Policy Lab roundtables.

Intended and unintended consequences of border enforcement

Credible evidence is key to evidence-informed policymaking. While the absence of credible evidence about policy consequences might make it easier for policymakers to declare victory, protracted and politically polarised issues are less likely to actually be resolved, and debates about policies are more likely to accommodate greater rhetoric and extreme framing. Since the 1999 white paper “Modernising Government”, which called for policies that are “forward-looking and shaped by the evidence rather than a response to short-term pressures,” the UK has fostered evidence-informed policy making in some areas. The What Works Networks support evidence production, sharing, and utilization in decision making in some areas but not immigration. The Cabinet Office promotes policy evaluation and evidence utilization across all of government but again with limited attention to immigration.

Similar efforts are urgently needed in border enforcement, and immigration policy more generally. The absence of better evidence permitting policy-makers and the public to understand and debate the trade-offs of different enforcement policies, degrades the quality of the debate and can lead to weakened trust in government when policies fail to deliver as promised.

We can think of smugglers as people operating in a market. They supply - in exchange for money - a service to individuals that seek to enter the UK without the right to enter. We can think of the market for smuggling as featuring two key players: consumers (migrants seeking to cross borders) and suppliers (smugglers providing services). Both consumers and suppliers are price-sensitive: their willingness to demand or supply the service depends on the price.

In a standard economic demand-supply model, policy interventions increasing external border enforcement (e.g., increasing penalties for smugglers, increasing efforts to detect smugglers, or increasing the costs of procurement) reduce the amount of smuggling. How much this change shapes whether people decide to hire a smuggler depends critically on the elasticity of demand to migrate to the UK. When demand is highly inelastic (meaning consumers are not very sensitive to price changes), interventions that increase costs will raise the price but only lead to minor reductions in the quantity supplied. Migrants demanding smuggling services might also differ in their price sensitivity. Even when all of them are similar in their price sensitivity, those that step back first are migrant groups with the highest price elasticity, who are likely to be the poorest among all migrants. Increasing external border enforcement and the resulting cost-pressure might also mean that smugglers turn to cheaper inflatable boats, providing just-enough fuel for a pre-planned route and require more migrants to use the same boat. All of these measures could increase the risk for migrants to drown at sea.

When the market for smuggling features different types of suppliers, interventions might not only affect the price and quantity supplied but might also change the composition of suppliers. Here is one of many possible scenarios. Suppose that there are two types of smugglers: a small number of professionalized smuggling businesses and a larger number of freelancing smugglers. Suppose also that organized smuggling businesses are better at avoiding detection from increased enforcement compared to freelancing smugglers. With increasing enforcement, the comparative advantage of

Missing evidence about the consequences of border enforcement

organized businesses grows compared to freelancing smugglers. Some freelancers will exit the market, leaving behind a higher proportion of the market share to professionalized smuggling businesses.

As freelancing smugglers exit, a small number of professionalized smugglers dominate the market. These businesses will then find it easier to coordinate and ration the supply of smuggling to maximize their profits. In other words, border enforcement might have unintended consequences: it helps consolidate smuggling markets in the hands of a small number of professionalized actors, while also fueling their profits.

Border enforcement comes with trade-offs. And in the face of trade-offs, evidence becomes more important when making decisions. When investing tens of millions on border enforcement policy, what should the public expect in terms of reduction in migrant arrivals, and how many of them will be eligible for asylum? How many smugglers are likely arrested? Unfortunately, the answers to these questions are unclear, as there is limited credible evidence on border enforcement consequences. The limited evidence suggests that demand for smuggling may be fairly inelastic and that increasing law enforcement in illicit markets may well lead to unintended consequences.

In research on the US southern border, economist Christina Gathmann (2008) studied the impact of the border wall at the US southern border on irregular immigration.² Combining multiple sources of data, Gathmann estimates how smuggling prices and quantity react to border enforcement efforts. Her results suggest that prices increase substantially with increasing border enforcement, but demand is fairly inelastic, that is, irregular immigration remains stable even when prices by smugglers go up.³

This is not to say that demand is always inelastic when border enforcement increases, however the human costs seem steep. Australia’s “Pacific Solution” in 2001 reduced registered boat arrivals to zero in less than a year. While there is agreement that the policy reduced boat arrivals, it is less clear which component of the policy package caused this decline. Case experts suggest that the primary deterrent was not the offshore processing component, but rather the Australian navy’s decision to turn back boats at sea—a practice that significantly increased asylum seekers’ risk of drowning.⁴

Similar research on smuggling at the Channel does not exist. While the government does publish information on the number of small boat crossings and some limited information about the migrants on board (i.e. age, sex or

² Christina Gathmann uses border crossing histories of over 2,200 Mexican migrants collected by other researchers in a multiyear research project as well as data on enforcement efforts along the Southwest border by the US government. The survey data not only included information about where the migrants crossed but also how much they paid to smugglers, LISER, October 2008..

³ Related projects Feigenberg (2020) and Allen, Castro Dobbin, and Morten (2024) look at whether increasing enforcement displaces migrants to other (more dangerous) routes along the US southern border.

⁴ See for example Migration Policy Institute, [The Central Role of Cooperation in Australia’s Immigration Enforcement](#), March 2022.

country of nationality), such limited data are insufficient to study demand elasticity. Information on prices paid to smugglers, waiting times, and routes traveled is necessary. In countries like Germany, the government sponsors large-scale and annual survey data collection from asylum seekers and refugees that includes survey items on these questions.⁵

Our concerns about enforcement unintentionally fanning professionalized smuggling business come from research on drug trafficking that highlights the many unintended consequences of law enforcement actions on the so-called ‘War on Drugs’. Studies in this area consistently show that enforcement can paradoxically increase violence and strengthen criminal organizations, rather than lead to a genuine reduction in criminal activity. For example, Melissa Dell (2015) demonstrates how law enforcement crackdowns in Mexico led to more violence as weakened drug gangs fought for territory. It also pushed gangs to further professionalize their operations to sustain territorial control and continue to traffic drugs. Juan Camilo and colleagues (2020) show how similar dynamics unfold in the context of cocaine interdiction in Colombia. These studies, and others, collectively reveal a pattern where well-intentioned law enforcement actions trigger violent competition among gangs and prompt professionalization, rather than the collapse of criminal organizations.

Of course, the US southern border differs from the Channel, and the market for smuggling to the UK is different from the drug market in South America. Our concern is that the absence of credible evidence on the consequences of law enforcement actions against human smugglers means that policymaking in this area is not well equipped to design policies that deliver on intended policy goals. Worse, the absence of policy evaluations in this area means that some policies risk having unintended consequences and that alternative policy options to shift away demand from smugglers, like providing safe and legal routes, are not considered.⁶

Conclusion

An evidence-informed approach to border enforcement policies is clearly needed. To that end, the government should encourage, support, and fund independent research that systematically builds an evidence base to inform policymaking in this area. In addition, providing researchers better access to existing administrative data, common in other policy areas, such as the Data First program led by the Ministry of Justice, would be an important step forward. Existing secure infrastructures exist and ongoing data collection efforts, such as the UK Household Longitudinal Study “Understanding UK” should be enabled to collect regular and timely survey data about arriving immigrants using contact information held by the Home Office. While not inexpensive, the amount of money needed to generate evidence is likely to be a small fraction of what is spent on current policies.

The absence of credible evidence on border enforcement comes with significant costs. Limited and low-quality evidence makes it difficult for both policy-makers and the public to evaluate the value for money and gauge the risk of unintended consequences when new policies are proposed. When new

5 The IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, 7 May 2025.

6 See also Gardiner-Smith and Graham, 2025. Clemens (2024) provides some initial evidence that providing legal routes does not increase demand in the case of the US southern border.

policies are implemented and fail to deliver on policy outcomes, the public is likely to lose trust in the government. Moreover, without credible evidence on likely policy outcomes, the quality of the public debate declines. In our view, the production and utilization of credible evidence on border enforcement and immigration policy more generally is essential to enable policies focused on fairness, evidence, and value for money, while simultaneously reducing the heat around the debate.⁷

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The case for a new community-identified sponsorship programme in the UK



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The refugee system is collapsing. More people are fleeing and there are fewer places to seek protection. Borders are strained, hotels are full, and local services are overwhelmed. Smugglers are thriving, while costs soar and societies divide.

Our citizens want action.

Recent UK governments have responded by shutting down most protection opportunities. This has brought failed efforts to stop the boats; expensive and unsustainable programmes; and the complete closure of many legal routes.

A better option exists - one that restores order and control at the border through a cost-efficient system, while also ensuring businesses have workers, universities have students, and families can reunite. Public support will be unlocked, and no hotels will be needed. This system will uphold humanitarian values while positioning the UK as a world leader during a critical moment in history.

The solution sits with a controlled pathway that will allow sponsors to identify the individuals they wish to protect and support. Over 45 years of Canadian experience, as well as lessons from dozens of newer programmes, demonstrate that community-identified sponsorship reduces costs and increases control, improves newcomer integration, builds community cohesion and bolsters confidence in migration systems.

Critically, community-identified sponsorship can also provide essential protection opportunities while contributing to reduced border arrivals, including by strengthening and expanding the existing agreement with France.

This is the way forward for the UK.

What is it?

Community-identified sponsorship allows sponsors to identify and support newcomers they wish to welcome and leverages existing ties, motivations, resources, and networks. Candidates are rigorously screened by governments and arrive through controlled pathways to dedicated support networks created through personal connections—family and friends, people of the same faith or ethnicity, students, workers, LGBTQ+ identifying persons, etc.

Think of a local church, mosque, university or sports club deciding to welcome a family, student or worker. They raise funds, find a flat and help parents into work and kids into school. This model contrasts with refugee resettlement programmes that place unfamiliar newcomers into overwhelmed communities selected by governments.

In Canada, neighbours from all parts of the country have welcomed displaced families for almost 50 years - from churches in Toronto to hockey clubs in Winnipeg - through the Private Sponsorship of Refugees programme. A quarter of the Canadian population has been involved.¹ Private sponsorship is open to refugees meeting government requirements, including having qualifying sponsors in Canada willing to welcome them.

Canada has deployed community-identified sponsorship programmes in response to recent crises in Syria, Afghanistan, Sudan and Gaza.² It also controls how many refugees of other nationalities can come to Canada each year and has created special programmes to encourage sponsors focusing on women at risk, LGBTQI+ refugees, refugee workers and refugee students. In 2025, Canadian sponsors will be allowed to welcome more than 23,000 displaced individuals who they themselves have identified.³

Other countries have experimented with community-identified sponsorship and have also seen success.⁴ These examples reinforce the UK’s own positive experiment with sponsor identification through the Homes for Ukraine programme.

It is time to do this again, as part of a cost-efficient and controlled plan that replaces unwelcome boats with controlled pathways to welcoming communities.

Outcomes

Since 2017, Canada and its partners in the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative have helped launch over 40 sponsorship programmes worldwide.⁵ Lessons from these programmes have reinforced the benefits of community-identified sponsorship, including:

1 ‘Canada’s World Survey 2018,’ Environics Institute, 2018. Over 400,000 refugees have arrived through the programme: ‘By the numbers - 40 years of Canada’s Private Sponsorship of Refugees programme,’ IRCC, 21 July 2020.

2 ‘#WelcomeAfghans: Key Figures,’ IRCC, 17 December 2024.

3 ‘Notice—Supplementary Information for the 2025-2027 Immigration Levels Plan,’ IRCC, 24 October 2024

4 Community-identified sponsorship programmes include: [Welcome Corps](#) and humanitarian parole pathways for [Ukrainians](#), [Cubans](#), [Haitians](#), [Nicaraguans](#), and [Venezuelans](#) in the United States; [humanitarian corridors](#) in Italy; the [Special Humanitarian and Community Support](#) programmes in Australia; the [Community Sponsorship programme for Afghans](#) in Brazil; [State Admission programmes](#) in Germany; and the [IRPP Humanitarian Admissions programme](#) in Ireland. Lessons about sponsorship have also been gleaned from other models which have not allowed sponsor identification.

5 Canada’s response to the Syrian crisis inspired the creation and launch of the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (GRSI) to share sponsorship worldwide: ‘[Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative promotes Canada’s private refugee sponsorship model](#),’ IRCC, 15 December 2016; Other partners include the UNHCR, Pathways International, The Giustra Foundation, Open Society Foundations, the Shapiro Foundation, Porticus, and Robert Bosch Stiftung; ‘[Celebrating Millions of Sponsors Welcoming a Million New Neighbours](#)’ The Global Refuge Sponsorship Initiative, December 2024. I co-founded the GRSI and serve as its Chair.

1. **Strengthened capacity to welcome - and no hotels:** Pressures on local services are eased by guaranteeing symmetry between arrivals and community capacity, e.g. newcomers can only come if a house has already been found by their sponsors and other reception requirements are met. Hotels are never needed under this model.
2. **Faster integration:** Newcomers secure jobs and housing faster, and keep those jobs long-term.⁶ They rely less on welfare and report stronger community ties⁷ e.g. privately sponsored Syrians were eight times as likely to find work within their first months in Canada, and secured housing twice as fast, as government resettled refugees.⁸
3. **Reduced costs:** Sponsors typically pay for housing, furniture, income support and other things. Plus, government-funded hotels are never used, and newcomers find jobs faster. Consequently, these programmes are significantly cheaper. Canadian private sponsors pay an average of \$28,700 for a family of four.
4. **Increased control and flexibility:** Governments control who enters the country and who can sponsor them, ensuring order and safety. Meanwhile, allowing sponsors to identify who they are best able to support ensures flexibility to meet the needs of local communities as well as specialised sponsors like universities and employers.
5. **Reduced unauthorised arrivals to borders:** Community identification combined with government vetting promotes order and security at our borders and can strengthen and expand route-based arrangements, including the UK-France deal. People stop risking dangerous journeys when safe sponsorship exists. Experience shows that when scaled and paired with enforcement, community-identified sponsorship can provide a humane and effective alternative to unauthorised border arrivals.⁹

Together, these outcomes **increase public confidence that migration policy is controlled, orderly and compassionate**.¹⁰ Even when opposition to migration has been high, community-identified sponsorship has enjoyed cross-party support in Canada and strong public backing, including among migration-sceptical groups.¹¹ Similar trends exist in the US and Germany - and in the UK too.¹²

6 [‘The Short-Term Labour Market Outcomes of Blended Visa Office-Referred Refugees’](#), Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2024.

7 Ibid.

8 [‘Syrian Outcomes Report’](#), Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, June 2019; Janine Prantl, ‘Community Sponsorships for Refugees and Other Forced Migrants: Learning from outside and inside the United States’, Georgetown Immigration Law Journal, 2022; [‘Evaluation of the Resettlement Programmes \(GAR, PSR, BVOR, and RAP\)’](#), IRCC, 2016.

9 Marcela Escobari and Alex Brockwehl, [‘Managing migration under pressure: Lessons from the Biden presidency to build a migration policy in the national interest’](#), 2025.

10 Jennifer Bond, The power of politics: Exploring the true potential of community sponsorship programmes, Research handbook on the law and politics of migration. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021. 155-170.

11 [‘Understanding public opinion on migration and the potential of sponsorship’](#), More in Common, June 2025.

12 Ibid.

The UK’s path forward

The UK has never tried a robust community-identified sponsorship program. Its Community Sponsorship Scheme is embedded in the existing resettlement system and relies on government matching. This is a different form of sponsorship that struggles in every country. Empowering communities to identify who they sponsor is critical to a new path forward.

The UK’s Homes for Ukraine program demonstrates the potential. This emergency pathway allowed sponsors to identify who they wished to support. Hundreds of thousands of people from across the country participated. Most sponsors would host again¹³, and public support jumped when people saw it was community-driven¹⁴.

The UK can build on this success by creating a new, controlled pathway that is funded by sponsors empowered to nominate the people they wish to welcome. These sponsors can take responsibility for housing and other integration support so the government can save money, avoid hotels, and empower local, community-led engagement.

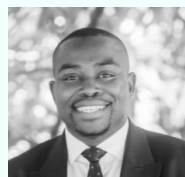
Such a pathway can be at the heart of a new strategy that provides a true alternative to small boats.

In embracing community-identified sponsorship, the UK can address the crisis at home while leading the world with compassion and common sense.

13 [‘Experiences of Homes for Ukraine scheme sponsors’](#), UK Office of National Statistics, 2023.

14 [‘Understanding public opinion’](#), More in Common, June 2025.

Beyond survival: Delivering protection, belonging, and futures for unaccompanied children



Councillor Anthony Okereke

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Debates on asylum often reduce children to numbers: arrivals, case backlogs and budget lines. Yet behind every statistic is a child whose journey to safety has already been marked by war, persecution, exploitation and loss. For the thousands of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) in London, arrival should be the moment that survival gives way to recovery and hope. Instead, many face a prolonged limbo in which protection is partial, integration is delayed and futures are uncertain.

The recent research report, [The Needs of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children and Young People Living in London](#), commissioned by London Councils and the Association of London Directors of Children's Services - underscores the need for systemic change. Conducted by university and peer researchers through a participatory, trauma-informed approach, it places the voices of young people at the centre of the analysis. The message from the young people who contributed was clear: at present, too many are being let down by a system that urgently needs change and a culture shift to a child-first approach.

This essay draws on that report's findings and recommendations to propose a renewed vision for the delivery of asylum and social care for children: one in which the principles of protection, well-being, and integration are not afterthoughts, but the foundations of policy and practice. Implementing these recommendations would not only improve outcomes for unaccompanied children, but contribute to more effective asylum and care systems that would ultimately reduce costs for local authorities and central government.¹

The London context

London has long been a place of sanctuary for those fleeing conflict and persecution. Between 2019 and 2023, nearly one-third of all unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in England were in the care of London boroughs. For some local authorities, unaccompanied children make up over 15 per cent of all looked-after children and this sits within a context of broader structural pressures: a shortage of foster carers, unregulated accommodation, rising living costs and an underfunded care system.

¹ See for example [cost-benefit analysis on implementing a legal guardianship scheme for unaccompanied children](#) by Unicef.

Local authorities across London are willing to help, and each year London boroughs make offers to Kent County Council above and beyond their National Transfer Scheme allocation² to provide care and support for vulnerable children. London boroughs care for more than twice as many unaccompanied children as other local authorities in England. However, sufficient funding and investment by government in children's services is crucial to ensure this support is sustainable in the long-term.

Delays and the resulting asylum claims and appeal backlogs also place serious pressure on local services. Speeding up decisions would help reduce these backlogs, ease financial strain on councils and lead to better outcomes for the children involved.

For many young people, turning 18 brings further instability. Those without secure immigration status do not have access to mainstream benefits, are barred from most work and study opportunities and risk destitution if local authority support is withdrawn. The report notes that in March 2023, at least 521 care leavers with "no recourse to public funds" were being financially supported by just 15 London boroughs - two-thirds of them asylum seekers or young people who had exhausted their appeal rights but to whom councils continue to owe leaving care duties.

Listening to the needs and experiences of children

One of the most powerful aspects of the report is its participatory methodology. Through peer researchers and an advisory group of young people with lived experience, the study framed its inquiry around three concepts: protection, well-being and integration. The children themselves explored what these concepts mean to them.

Protection meant more than a grant of refugee status. It meant decisions that are child-centred and timely; being believed by professionals; access to independent legal guardianship, advocacy, quality legal representation and information about rights.

Well-being encompassed: safety and security, including freedom from racism and violence; good mental health and peace of mind; reliable, caring relationships with professionals; opportunities for fun, learning, and personal growth.

Integration was seen not as an "end point" but as part of well-being itself: a sense of belonging to multiple communities; freedom to hope and plan for the future; equal access to education, work and cultural life.

These definitions are strikingly consistent with the UK's statutory obligations under the Children Act 1989, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Refugee Convention. Yet the young people's testimonies reveal a reality in which those commitments are often undermined by policy design and delivery gaps.

² The formula used by government to transfer unaccompanied children between local authorities, intended to secure a fairer, more equitable distribution across local authorities.

Delivery failures and how systems can reproduce harm

Process over protection - Many young people described the asylum process as adversarial, repetitive, exhausting and retraumatising. Recounting traumatic events multiple times - to solicitors, social workers, age assessors, and asylum interviewers - intensified feelings of fear, shame and isolation. Some were asked politically loaded questions far beyond their experience as children; others felt unable to disclose abuse or exploitation due to embarrassment or lack of trust.

Age disputes and misplaced children - Where the Home Office disputed their age, children endured prolonged assessments, sometimes being placed in adult accommodation or even detained. Recent FOI data shows that in just six months of 2024, at least 262 children in England and Scotland were wrongly treated as adults, denied access to education and support from children’s services: a failure with profound safeguarding implications.

Gaps in social care support - While some social workers were described as lifelines, experiences in social care support varied widely between boroughs. Many children navigated the asylum process largely alone, finding solicitors through peers rather than professionals. Few received proactive help to secure expert evidence for their cases. Integration support, such as community connections and activities, was patchy, leaving many isolated and vulnerable to exploitation or racist abuse.

Policy shifts and hostile climate - The wider political environment, combined with delayed asylum decisions and the threat of removal upon turning 18, undermined their mental health and sense of safety. One of the children described how difficult it was to navigate the system as a child while experiencing such uncertainty: *“I don’t know if I’m going to stay or they’ll ask me to leave. It’s a part of my life now that I have to go through every day.”*

These decisions have real and lasting consequences - and the current approach is not fit for purpose. Children risk fleeing persecution only to be entrapped by another harmful system.

The solutions proposed by the young participants, and strengthened by the research team, span arrival procedures, social care, asylum decision-making and long-term integration. The findings make clear that we need a trauma-informed, child-centred approach that puts the welfare of children at the heart of the asylum system. The report sets out five clear areas of recommendation to help achieve this:

1. Arrival and early support

- Psychological assessment and trauma-informed care from day one.
- No police or immigration questioning on arrival; immediate placement in safe, child-friendly accommodation.
- Early allocation of an independent legal guardian with expertise in asylum, trafficking, and care systems. This should draw lessons on the legal guardianship model already adopted in Scotland with proven cost-benefit impact.³

3 UNICEF and The Children's Society, [Protecting children through guardianship: The costs and benefits of guardianship for unaccompanied and separated migrant children](#)

Towards a child-first approach: Solutions from young people

2. Rights, information, and advocacy

- Age-appropriate, language-accessible information on rights and entitlements at multiple points in the journey.
- Social workers to explain their corporate parenting role clearly and consistently.
- Independent advocacy for all children in the asylum process, including those subject to age disputes.

3. Social care as a protective force

- Social workers and personal advisers to take proactive responsibility for supporting children through the asylum process, ensuring quality legal representation and attending key appointments.
- Consistent integration and belonging support to combat isolation and racism.
- Extended care and financial support up to age 25, regardless of education or immigration status, to prevent destitution.

4. Reforming asylum decision-making

- Transfer responsibility for child asylum decisions from the Home Office to an independent, child-focused body.
- Make processes trauma-informed and sensitive to children’s developmental stages.
- Set fair timeframes: quicker decisions without sacrificing preparation time for appeals.
- Grant the right to work and study during the asylum process to promote integration and well-being.

5. Structural and legislative change

- Age disputes should be exceptional and only when the child’s age is in serious doubt, rather than the default position. Introduce “protective leave to remain” for all unaccompanied children entering care, based on best-interests assessments.
- Strengthen statutory duties on local authorities to resolve children’s immigration status early.
- Ensure timely, free, expert legal aid for both children and care leavers.

If implemented, these recommendations would transform the asylum journey for children from a protracted ordeal into a structured pathway towards security, belonging, and child-centred practices of care. But delivery will require coordinated action across central government, local authorities and civil society.

Central government must legislate for independent guardianship, reform age assessments and create a statutory integration framework for unaccompanied children. The Ministry of Justice must fix legal aid shortages. There are clear **financial benefits to doing so**. A number of pilots in London boroughs successfully showed how grant funding for legal advice for children in care with immigration needs has significant cost savings for local authorities through early resolution of immigration status and needs. Central to this is reducing

Delivering on the vision: From recommendations to reality

the No Recourse to Public Funds burden on local authorities for children who turn 18 and have unresolved immigration status.⁴ There are also clear positive impacts for the wellbeing and sense of security for unaccompanied children.

Local authorities should embed immigration and integration planning into every child’s care pathway, resource social workers to take active roles in asylum support and develop regional “knowledge hubs” to share expertise and good practice.

Civil society - from refugee charities to faith groups - can strengthen the ecosystem of support by offering mentoring, community connections and advocacy. The participatory methods used in this research should become the norm, ensuring young people co-design the services that shape their futures.

Integration as the measure of success

In the current debate, “integration” is too often treated as an end point once someone has received a decision on their asylum claim. The young people in this research reject that notion. For them, integration begins the day they arrive. Belonging to a football team, attending college, volunteering in the community; these are not distractions from the asylum process, they are essential to recovery and cultivating a sense of community and belonging.

The challenge, therefore, is not only to resolve immigration status but to create the conditions in which young people can form relationships, pursue education and imagine their futures without fear. This requires recognising integration as a statutory obligation, tied to well-being outcomes and funding it accordingly.

A vision for renewal

Rebuilding the UK’s asylum system for children is not simply about undoing the harm of recent years; it is about designing a future in which no child’s life is put on hold by bureaucratic inertia or political hostility. London, with its rich history of sanctuary, is the place to lead this renewal.

The vision is clear:

- Every child is met with safety, care, and legal protection from the moment they arrive.
- Asylum processes are swift, fair, and child-centred.
- Social care is not treated as parallel system from the asylum system. A radical shift is needed away from the rigid immigration focus on unaccompanied children to strengthen the role of social care in securing status and fostering belonging.
- Integration is woven into the fabric of daily life for children from day one.
- Backlogs and costs faced by local authorities are reduced.

⁴ See CordisBright, [Executive summary for the evaluation of the Children in Care with Immigration Needs Programme](#), July 2023.

Delivering on this vision demands political will, adequate resources, and an unwavering commitment to seeing unaccompanied asylum-seeking children first and foremost as children - with all the rights, potential and dignity that entails.

As one young participant put it: *“I’m happy to talk if this is going to contribute to fixing the services and helping other people - why not talk about it?”*

We have heard them speak, and now it’s time we act.

