



Future  
Governance  
Forum

# RETHINKING MIGRATION 01

The case for a new progressive  
deal with Europe

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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:

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- **Impactful Devolution:** How can we meaningfully and permanently devolve power in one of the most centralised countries in the world?
- **Rethinking Migration:** How might we deliver a more effective asylum system that sustains greater public confidence, while remaining consistent with the principles of international law and progressive values?

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 'Rethinking Migration' work

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'Rethinking Migration' asks how the UK can deliver a more effective migration and asylum system that sustains public confidence, while remaining consistent with the principles of international law and progressive values. Focusing on one of the most politically salient and challenging areas of public policy making and delivery, this project aims to surface new thinking and innovations to provide the ideas to power a system fit for the future.

## About the authors

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## Collaborators

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This report draws on research collaboration with the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) and many of the recommendations have been co-developed. The collaboration benefited from contributions by a range of experts, practitioners and policymakers in the UK and Europe.

# Executive summary

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The deal struck with France in June 2025 to pilot a new ‘one-in, one-out’ approach to Channel crossings was a remarkable achievement. Within a year of taking office, the UK government had reset relations with France and secured the EU’s blessing for a bespoke returns and admissions agreement for asylum seekers, for the first time since Brexit – something the previous Conservative government had desired, but concluded was impossible.

This approach - ‘routes for returns’ - is in line with international law, progressive, and offers the best chance of a significant and sustained reduction in small boat crossings, essential to restoring control, regaining public trust and increasing safety for refugees. And yet, we have heard very little about the deal from the government since, with Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood turning her attention to the contested policy of ‘pull factors’, announcing sweeping reforms to the UK asylum system in an effort to make Britain more inhospitable to would-be asylum seekers.

One year after the scheme was announced, and four months before the current pilot is due to expire, we review the lessons from this groundbreaking pilot, what it suggests about the shape and value of future EU cooperation, and argue for the expansion of the pilot to deliver a game-changing fall in dangerous and disorderly channel crossings.

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## Lessons from the pilot

### 1. A bespoke ‘routes for returns’ agreement between the UK and EU is possible, legal and deliverable

While it has faced teething problems, the pilot has delivered proof of concept for a new model of cooperation between the UK and Europe that is practical, based on good evidence of what can reduce irregular migration and consistent with our legal and moral obligations. And there is emerging evidence that it is changing smuggler behaviour.

### 2. One-for-one should be dropped in favour of ‘fair share’

The principle of reciprocity and the UK taking its ‘fair share’ is the right one, but this does not need to amount to arithmetic balance in real time. The government’s ambition should be for controlled refugee arrivals, as opposed to uncontrolled arrivals (the situation today) or no refugee arrivals (which is neither practical nor ethical). Over time, this means the UK should take substantially more refugees through legal routes from Europe than we return back to Europe. Far from a bad deal for the UK, this would be proof of successful cooperation to tackle irregular migration. The aim should be that in future most asylum seekers should be stopped in their first country of arrival in Europe to make an asylum claim, dangerous irregular crossings by boat or lorry to the UK would be very low, and the UK instead plays its part by giving protection to a *fair share* of asylum seekers through safe and legal routes from Europe.

### 3. Prioritise a migration deal

The Home Office is currently pushing through two of the most significant packages of reform to migration and domestic asylum policy in a generation and recently introduced the new Immigration and Asylum Bill. The 'Reset' agenda with the EU meanwhile has multiple major priorities including trade, energy and defence. The government has only so much bandwidth and political capital to get big things across the line, and it is dealing with an EU for whom Channel crossings is not a top priority. If the government means it when they say migration (and small boats) is a top priority, they must make that clear internally within government and prioritise within the reset agenda.

### 4. Make a confident case for cooperation

Awareness of the pilot is low – amongst would-be asylum seekers in Calais (many only learn about it on the bus to detention after arriving in the UK), and the British public. However the pilot tells a strong story about the UK government's approach towards small boat crossings: valued-based cooperation with our closest neighbours; Britain playing its part to prevent dangerous small boat journeys and provide asylum in a safe and orderly way. This creates a clear, principled and practical dividing line with those who wish to pull out of international treaties and deny protection to refugees which the government should lean into and confidently argue for.

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## The next phase

While numbers of small boat crossings in the first quarter of 2026 are down, they remain in the tens of thousands annually. Public concern about small boats continues to dominate and distort the debate on migration, and refugees continue to face exploitation and death at the hands of smugglers whom they pay in desperation to reach the UK.

Building on the lessons on the pilot, we recommend the government aim to negotiate a new deal - at scale - with Europe. A real (and lawful) deterrent in the form of a high probability of return for illegal entry, supported by accessible safe routes at scale to divert demand - a 'routes for returns' approach - remains the best-evidenced, progressive approach to reducing large-scale irregular movements of migrants. The UK now has the foundations to build on with France and other European countries.

The UK should prioritise this agenda as part of the EU reset negotiations, pushing for a two-step deal that would see:

1. **A six month circuit-breaker**, whereby in an arrangement 'blessed by the EU', France and other key European partners would agree to the return of at least 80% of people arriving in the UK by small boat and lorry from Europe, made possible by the UK offering to take a significant proportion of asylum seekers from the EU's Solidarity Pool.

If the circuit-breaker works to reduce arrivals, this should be followed by:

- 2. A permanent bespoke UK-European migration cooperation framework** that expands the UK-France pilot into a wider arrangement, drawing in other countries in the Calais Group, and Med5 states. This would allow the UK to offer tailor-made, safe and legal pathways for asylum at scale and secure a 'returns backstop' from Europe, without binding itself to the EU asylum *acquis*.

To address concerns over asylum accommodation capacity, the government could make 50% of those brought through safe routes reliant on community sponsorship, and could consider allowing asylum seekers who have arrived via these safe routes to work, enabling them to contribute from day one rather than wait for a decision in hotels.

While most of the public will only experience small boats through their television and smartphone screens, it is consistently cited as one of their top concerns. As images of dinghies continue to dominate media headlines, visible Channel crossings expose concerns about change in communities and pressures on public services, and have given shape to a deeper anxiety that in a globalised and increasingly interconnected world, democratic governments are powerless to control or even affect the big forces shaping our future.

The challenge for this Labour government is to show that international cooperation and operating within a rules-based framework that respects individual human rights and dignity can deliver solutions that are safer, fairer and more orderly.

There is a window of opportunity now to deliver this in the Channel. Irregular arrivals are down across the continent - the UK has seen a 38% reduction in small boat arrivals<sup>1</sup> and the EU a 40% drop in irregular border crossings.<sup>2</sup> The UK-France pilot has been renewed for only a few short months and the UK-EU reset negotiations are in progress, while global instability looms large. Polling shows that more people support an expanded deal with Europe than oppose, with strong support from Labour voters and those open to voting Labour on both the right and left.<sup>3</sup> If the UK chooses to prioritise it, there is an opportunity now to agree an approach that meets the interests of both sides, and makes Europe as a whole more resilient to whatever comes next.

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1 BBC Verify, '[Track UK's latest migration numbers - net migration, visas, asylum and small boats.](#)' Accessed 11 June 2026.

2 Frontex, '[Frontex: Irregular border crossings into the EU down 40% in the first five months of 2026](#)', 12 June 2026.

3 Methodology: Polling was conducted online between the 11th and 12th of May 2026 by Convergent Opinion. Convergent interviewed 2369 adults and weighted the sample to be both demographically and politically representative of all Britons. As part of the study, we used a conjoint experiment to gauge what drove people's preferences when it came to different immigration outcomes. Convergent Opinion is a member of the British Polling Council and can be contacted at: [info@convergent-opinion.com](mailto:info@convergent-opinion.com)

# Context for a new deal: a question of priorities

Small boat crossings have risen steadily since 2018, reaching their peak in 2022 at over 45,000.<sup>4</sup> Despite successive governments' attempts to eliminate them, the route has become established, with each new government measure met with a change of tactics by the smugglers that increases the danger to migrants - cramming more desperate people into unseaworthy dinghies as the price of operating rises, and risking longer journeys by departing further up the coast to evade detection.

While Channel crossing numbers are down so far this year, increased intervention by the French police is likely to only tell a small part of the story for this drop. Numbers remain generally dependent on factors outside of the government's control, ranging from the major - brutal civil wars, dictatorships and new conflicts pushing more people towards Europe - to the minor - a sustained period of good weather can result in a spike in Channel crossings without warning.

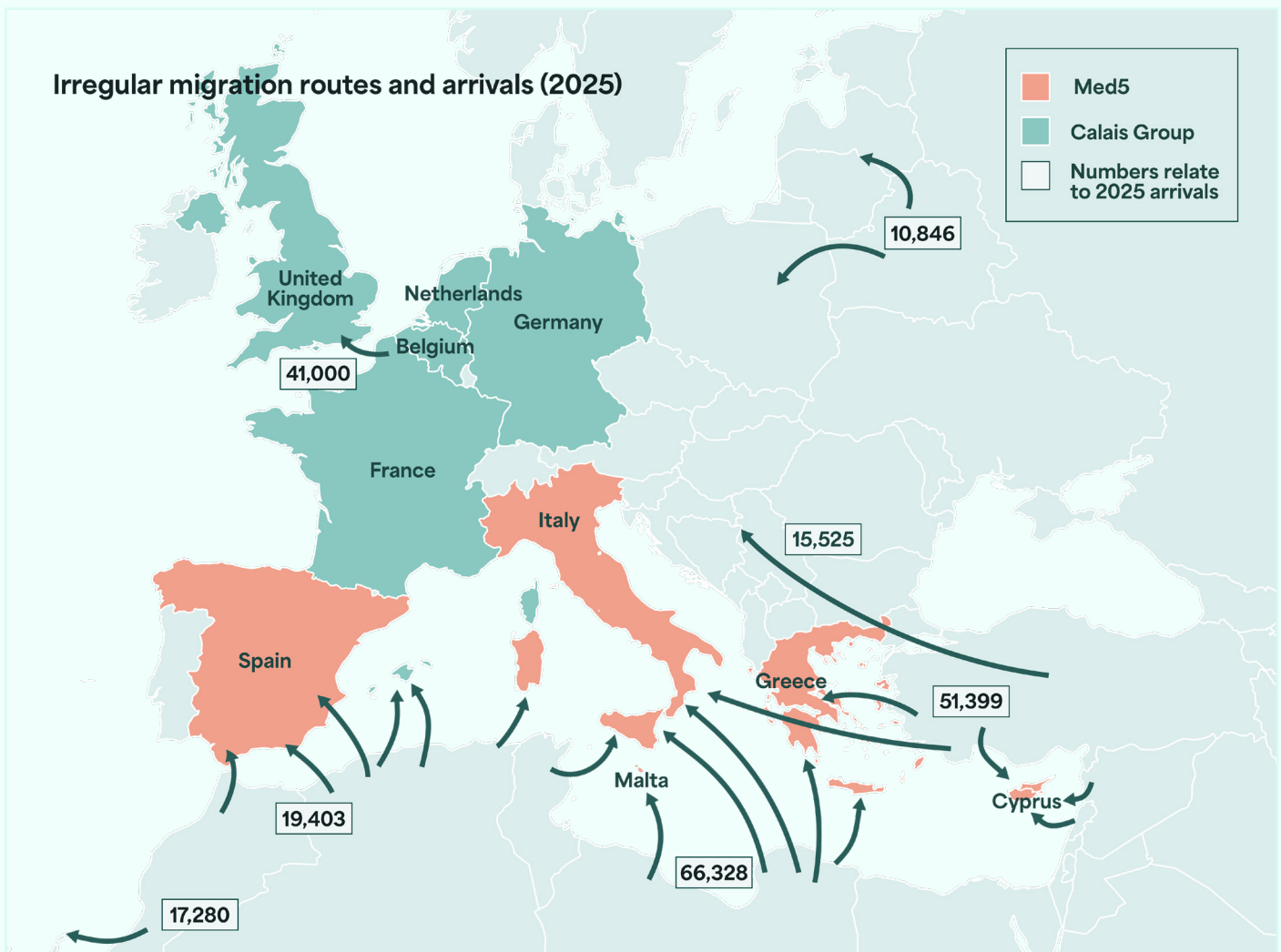
For an issue where the solutions lie in cooperation with our close neighbours, the problem for the UK is that Channel crossings have little salience in the EU. Even in France, the issue ranks low down in public concern outside of the town of Calais, and hardly features in Europe's migration debate.

Instead the EU is preoccupied with the implementation of its new flagship Migration Pact, designed to toughen Europe's approach towards new arrivals by speeding up returns for those without a valid asylum claim, and enforcing solidarity among Member States by requiring destination countries such as Germany and France to provide concrete support to countries of first arrival, like the Med5. These states have long rejected the idea they should act as Europe's detention centre for asylum seekers because an accident of geography situates them on the EU's external borders.

Negotiating in this context means the UK must reckon with a major imbalance of incentives - the chances of the EU helping the UK with its Channel problem out of goodwill are slim to none without the UK being prepared to offer something significant to the EU in return. But understanding and aligning more closely with the EU's interests could open real opportunities. The push and pull factors driving people to travel in small boats to the UK are no different to those driving people to seek safety and opportunity in the rest of Europe. 83% of first time asylum applications in the EU were made in France, Germany, Greece, Spain and Italy in 2025.<sup>5</sup> As in the UK, anxieties over asylum arrivals have been instrumentalised by far-right parties across Europe in a bid to win power, undermine institutions such as the EU and European Court of Human Rights and drag mainstream political parties further towards their worldview on migration.

<sup>4</sup> Home Office Immigration System Statistics, '[How many people come to the UK via illegal entry routes?](#)', year ending December 2025

<sup>5</sup> Eurostat, '[27% drop in first-time asylum applications in 2025](#)', 25 March 2026



Research conducted with Migration Policy Institute suggests that framing the issue as one part of a shared challenge, and identifying ways in which the UK can help Europe solve these live issues - such as reducing pressure on Med5 countries - could allow the UK to shrug off the perception of 'cakeism' among some EU leaders, and move into the realm of shared solutions with Member States.

Even so, a major offer of solidarity may not be enough to secure a deal at the sort of scale likely to reduce small boat and lorry crossings significantly. The UK should be prepared to consider what else it can offer the EU - particularly those countries most likely to block a future deal - if it is to secure its priority ambition of reducing these crossings. The Med5 countries reportedly tried to block the UK-France pilot, concerned that those returned by the UK to France would be transferred on through the EU's responsibility-sharing mechanism - ultimately becoming their responsibility without any reciprocity. Youth Mobility is a top priority for these countries, and a generous UK offer on this could help unlock their support. The EU will want to ensure that any deal with the UK does not undermine its flagship Migration Pact nor drive up the secondary movement of asylum seekers across Europe.

Yet despite much of the EU's focus being elsewhere, counterintuitively, now may be precisely the right time to argue for closer UK-EU cooperation on asylum policy.

Numbers of asylum seeker arrivals to the UK and Europe are down, meaning solutions that require Europe to take back asylum seekers from the UK may be more politically feasible. However, it is unclear how long this will hold, with greater global instability bearing the potential to drive large numbers of refugees towards Europe again in future, which could further destabilise the bloc and test EU solidarity. Forging closer cooperation as a region, including with the UK, on shared principles and objectives could prove increasingly important for the EU in navigating the new reality.

More significantly, the UK pivot towards Europe on security and defence also opens up new opportunities for cooperation on a wider domestic security agenda that should include countering the weaponisation of migration by foreign states including Russia, and also by the far-right. Europe must show that the rules and institutions it helped to build and champion globally can provide the solutions to increasingly interconnected challenges, rather than be used against them. The route to doing so lies only in closer cooperation with those who share core values and legal standards - and the UK remains a powerful ally for Europe in this fight.

Ultimately, whether the UK seizes these opportunities comes down to political priorities. While the government has consistently identified reducing small boats as one of its top priorities, its approach has appeared at times diffuse and unstrategic. In autumn the Home Office announced “*some of the most significant reforms to migration - both legal and asylum - in a generation*”,<sup>6</sup> dedicating just a few lines to the returns element of the UK-France pilot. With Home Office budgets facing real terms cuts, it will require a very clear steer from Ministers to prioritise a deal over other system reforms, which the evidence suggests are less likely to deliver a reduction in numbers in the Channel. Polling shows that the public’s priority is securing results, i.e. reducing the number of people arriving by small boat.<sup>7</sup> The suggestion that a ‘routes for returns’ deal could deliver a reduction in small boat crossings significantly increased the percentage choosing the policy over others in a conjoint style experiment, with the greatest reductions preferred. Likewise, the EU reset agenda is an opportunity to place migration at the heart of the agenda on security and prosperity with Europe; however, this could require the government to place migration above other important priorities. Whether a deal on Youth Mobility will be deployed to secure a better deal on trade or on migration will be instructive on where government priorities lie.

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<sup>6</sup> [Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood’s speech at the Institute for Public Policy Research on immigration reforms, 5 March 2026](#)

<sup>7</sup> Polling was conducted online between the 11th and 12th of May 2026 by Convergent Opinion.

# Case for cooperation: the opportunity of 'routes for returns'

With so much required of the UK government to get a new deal with Europe across the line, it is right to ask whether such an agreement would be worth it. On the face of it, the UK-France pilot has not delivered a step change in terms of numbers in the Channel, but then it was never set up to deliver the scale it would take to do so.

The government has made no secret of the fact that migration, and in particular tackling small boats, is a top priority and has invested time and energy in establishing a tough narrative designed to signal to both the British public and would-be asylum seekers that Labour is prepared to take a tough line on migration.

The challenge for Labour is that two years in, this message has failed to convince voters lost to Reform UK (who will always sound tougher)<sup>8</sup> nor change the behaviour of asylum seekers, who have continued to arrive by small boat in their tens of thousands. Progressive parties cannot outbid the right on tough rhetoric, but can demonstrate results on real-world concerns through effective delivery. To achieve this, the government should be prepared to be led by the evidence of what works, consistent with progressive values and take calculated political risks.

Polling suggests that the public would support a 'routes for returns' approach.<sup>9</sup> 62% of Labour voters back the UK agreeing a deal with European countries to tackle small boat crossings, which would see the UK return those who arrived by small boat and accept, in exchange, refugees through safe and legal routes. This approach was also attractive to voters that Labour lost to parties on their left and right but remain open to returning - 67% of these right 'switchers' and 65% of progressive 'switchers' were found to be supportive. The deal commanded good support generally with the public, with more people supporting than opposing overall.<sup>10</sup>

There is also good evidence now that a 'routes to returns' approach works.

As discussed in FGF's previous report 'Asylum Management Centres: A new approach to tackle small boat crossings' the recent example of the late stages of the Biden administration demonstrated what regional cooperation focused on both safe routes and returns can achieve.<sup>11</sup> This approach resulted in an overall drop in unlawful border crossings of 81%, with crossings by key

<sup>8</sup> Christabel Cooper, '[Who is Labour for?](#)', Think Labour, May 2026.

<sup>9</sup> Polling was conducted online between the 11th and 12th of May 2026 by Convergent Opinion.

<sup>10</sup> 48% of the public were supportive of a 'routes to returns' deal with European countries, with 34% opposed and 19% responding 'don't know'.

<sup>11</sup> Beth Gardiner-Smith and Emily Graham, '[Asylum Management Centres: A new approach to tackle small boat crossings](#)', The Future Governance Forum, 14 May 2025.

nationalities down 91%.<sup>12</sup> Pivotal to its success was the combination of tough border controls and enforcement action to tackle the ‘supply’ of human smuggling; access to pathways along migration routes at scale to divert demand away from smugglers and towards controlled legal pathways; and strategic regional cooperation that underpinned the entire approach along the whole of the migration route. The final lesson was scale - of both routes and returns. To achieve the reduction of irregular journeys, the US opened access to legal pathways, including online and via an app, with over 1,400,000 people coming via the different schemes.<sup>13</sup> Biden’s flagship humanitarian programme for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans (CHNV programme), which granted up to 30,000 admissions per month, was matched with an increase in enforcement and returns, as Biden struck a deal with Mexico that also allowed the US to return up to 30,000 people per month.

Emerging evidence suggests that this combination of ‘routes and returns’ - addressing both supply and demand of the smuggling business - is important in changing migrant and smuggler behaviour and to avoid unintended consequences. Typical border enforcement measures, such as heightened border security, will raise the operating costs for smugglers, but if demand for their services is highly inelastic (as it is when people are desperate), such measures are unlikely to significantly impact numbers travelling.<sup>14</sup> Addressing the “demand side” of the smuggling business, by creating alternative legal options for people who have a right to seek asylum, starts to change the equation.

The Channel is another good example of the limitations of “supply-side” and enforcement interventions on their own. Increased port security; greater intelligence-sharing; surveillance technology; and active patrols along the French coast to intercept boats have had only temporary effects, with smugglers adapting their tactics, and ruthlessly increasing the danger to migrants with little impact on demand for their services. Since 2018, the average number of people crammed onto a small boat crossing the Channel has increased from 7 to 62.<sup>15</sup> However, there have been instances where numbers have been far higher, including 125 people on one boat in September 2025. Recent reports suggest smugglers are now launching boats from the Belgian coast, potentially to avoid detection and eligibility for return under the

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) [December 2023 Monthly Update](#); U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) [December 2024 Monthly Update](#)

See also Frank Sharry, Lessons for the UK from the US on immigration policy and politics, [The Future of Asylum: A Vision for Renewal](#), The Future Governance Forum, 26 September 2025

<sup>13</sup> 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

<sup>14</sup> The exception to this is where border hardening measures significantly raise the risk of death or serious harm for asylum seekers, such as Australia’s Pacific Solution. Christina Gathmann, ‘Effects of enforcement on illegal markets: Evidence from migrant smuggling along the southwestern border’, *LISER*, October 2008.

See also Dr Alexandra Hartman and Dr Moritz Marbach, ‘Missing evidence and border enforcement’, [The Future of Asylum: A Vision for Renewal](#), The Future Governance Forum, 26 September 2025

<sup>15</sup> Esme Kirk-Wade, [‘Statistics on small boat Channel crossings’](#), House of Commons Library, 17 March 2026

'one-for-one' pilot - once again increasing the risk to people onboard as the journey becomes much longer and more hazardous.<sup>16</sup>

Other approaches, such as the 'Danish model', which has recently captured the political imagination, also lack evidence. This approach focuses on addressing so-called "pull factors" for asylum seekers by restricting in-country rights and benefits. However, research consistently shows that most asylum seekers on the move have little (or often false) information on their destination's asylum and welfare policies.<sup>17</sup> The factors that most influence asylum seekers' journeys to the UK are: social networks, speaking English and diaspora communities.<sup>18</sup> The causes of Denmark's decline in asylum applications are highly contested and are likely to be difficult to replicate in the UK, given our multicultural history and colonial ties to large parts of the world.

More fundamentally, the UK government should consider the costs of engaging in a race to the bottom on rights and standards for asylum seekers. Lowering standards and reducing access to asylum across Europe may result in deflection of asylum seekers from one country to another, but it does not stop desperate people making these journeys. It simply reduces the level of protection available to vulnerable people. There is also strong evidence that it harms integration outcomes, with long-term costs to society.<sup>19</sup>

In contrast, responsibility-sharing approaches based on safe routes and returns build international cooperation around both mutual interests - the prevention of unnecessary, uncontrolled and dangerous irregular journeys while still providing refugee protection - and shared values - a commitment to fundamental human rights. These approaches not only have the benefit for progressive governments of creating a clear dividing line with the far-right, they are also based on solid evidence of what works. They are both principled and deeply realistic about what is required to solve complex, highly interconnected global challenges.

<sup>16</sup> ['Migrants risk hypothermia on longer boat crossings'](#), BBC, 22 June 2026

<sup>17</sup> Brekke, J.-P., M. Røed, and P. Schöne (2017). Reduction or deflection? the effect of asylum policy on interconnected asylum flows. *Migration Studies* 5 (1), 65-96; Hatton, T. J. (2016). Refugees, asylum seekers, and policy in OECD countries. *American Economic Review* 106 (5), 441-45; Hatton, T. J. (2017). Refugees and asylum seekers, the crisis in Europe and the future of policy. *Economic Policy* 32 (91), 447-496.

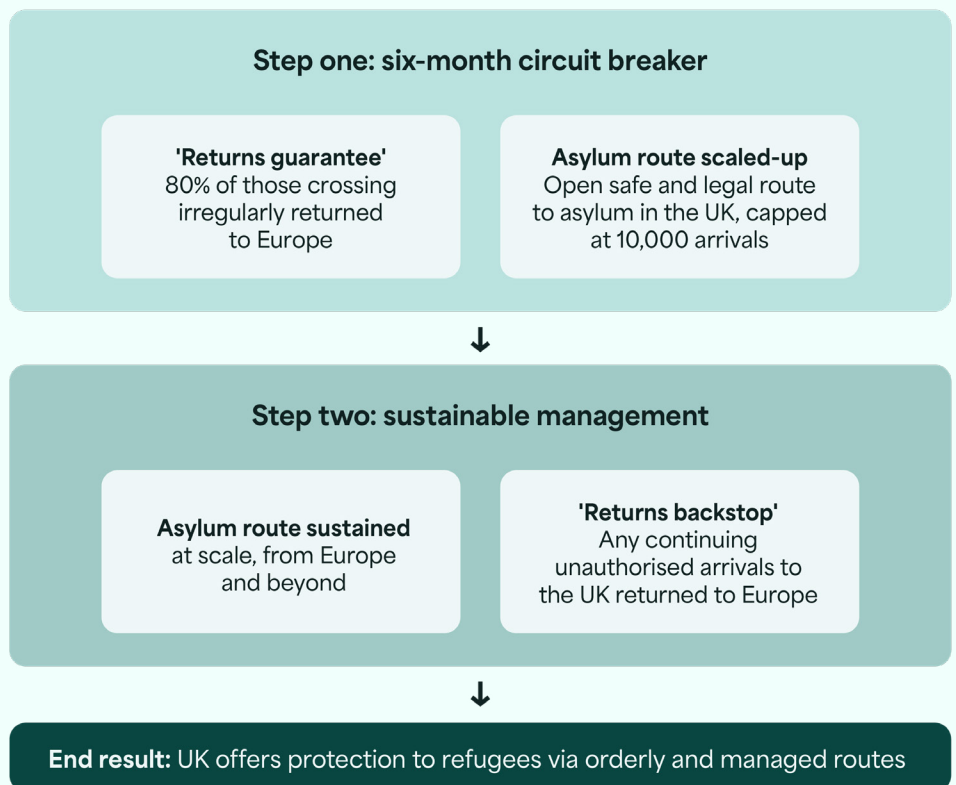
<sup>18</sup> Home Office (September 2020) [Sovereign Borders: International Asylum Comparisons Report](#). See also: Kang, Y.-D. (2021). Refugee Crisis in Europe: Determinants of Asylum Seeking in European Countries from 2008-2014. *Journal of European Integration* 43(1), 33-48; Matsui, N. and J. Raymer (2020). The Push and Pull Factors Contributing Towards Asylum Migration from Developing Countries to Developed Countries since 2000. *International Migration* 58(6), 210-231. Micevska, M. (2021). Revisiting Forced Migration: A Machine Learning Perspective. *European Journal of Political Economy* 70, 102044.

<sup>19</sup> The Danish government's own evaluation has found their asylum and migration policies failed to increase language skills, feelings of belonging in Danish society or participation in social life. Danish Ministry of Immigration and Integration's [Integration Barometer](#). See also: Dustmann, Christian, Rasmus Landersø, and Lars Højsgaard Andersen, ['Refugee benefit cuts'](#), *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 16; and Arendt, J.N., Dustmann, C. and Ku, H., ['Permanent residency and refugee immigrants' skill investment'](#), *Journal of Labor Economics*, 43(2), pp.293-318.

# Circuit-break then sustainability: the next phase of cooperation

Building on and expanding the UK-France pilot, we suggest that the UK seeks a deal with key European partners, including France, other Calais Group members and the Med5, which should be 'blessed' by the European Union.

This future cooperation should be based on the same principle of responsibility sharing via routes and returns, but delivered in two phases to achieve the speed and scale that is necessary to change migrant incentives and make a meaningful impact on numbers quickly.



## Phase one: six-month circuit-breaker

To dramatically change migrant behaviour and achieve an impact on Channel crossing numbers, the UK should aim for a rapid scaling of both the inbound safe route to the UK and returns to Europe. This would mean a one-off surge in the return of people who attempt crossings by small boat or lorry back to Europe, alongside a rise in the number of people accepted into the UK having crossed by safer, legal routes. The aim is that this intense six-month burst of activity would break the current cycle and allow for a more sustainable, longer term plan to be put in place (phase two).

### ***Returns guarantee, with 80% of those crossing returned to Europe***

To achieve a rapid increase in returns, the UK should seek a ‘returns guarantee’ with European partners that would see at least 80% of those who’ve crossed to the UK by boat or lorry returned to Europe. This would serve as a serious, visible deterrent to those looking to travel to the UK. Taking 2025 arrival numbers as a comparison, this could mean France and other willing EU countries accepting back as many as 16,000 people through returns procedures.

In order to be effective in changing behaviour, it must be clear to those considering crossing the Channel that it is no longer worth the risk. The evidence that exists on what constitutes an effective deterrent suggests that any intervention must be applied as universally as possible. For this reason, we suggest that the rate of returns should be as high as feasible, while recognising that there are some groups the UK should not seek to return, such as unaccompanied children or those with certain medical conditions.<sup>20</sup>

For it to be considered no longer worth the risk, those looking to cross must be well aware of both the likelihood of being returned if they attempt to travel by small boat or lorry and the option of the safe inbound route as the alternative. Policies cannot deter if they are not known about. Unlike the UK-France pilot, a significant investment in communications and awareness-raising will be required if asylum seekers are to be aware of the scheme, plus closer working with NGOs operating locally who can act as trusted information and referral partners.

The other lesson from the pilot was that the UK’s detention capacity risks acting as a brake on the government’s ability to deliver returns at scale. The government should consider a non-detained model instead, with detention reserved for a minority of cases where deemed necessary.

While there will need to be reciprocity, we suggest the UK should drop the “one-for-one” formula, which has now served its purpose. This gives greater flexibility, makes scaling more achievable and allows future cooperation to be framed around common purpose.

### ***Scaled up humanitarian route, capped at 10,000 arrivals***

Decades of border enforcement and juxtaposed controls across the Channel should have taught us that deterrents on their own, even when the probability of return is high, are unlikely to stop crossings when people are desperate and have already taken huge risks to reach France. What is also needed is a realistic alternative to the smuggler route that has the potential to shift migrant incentives and divert people onto official pathways. It is also right in principle - ensuring the UK plays its full part in providing asylum to refugees.

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<sup>20</sup> By way of comparison, 72.8% of people arriving by small boat and those detected in the UK after arriving irregularly by lorry or other means were adult men. Home Office Immigration System Statistics, [Illegal entry routes to the UK summary tables](#), year ending December 2025

The government could do this by expanding access to the current inbound route from France to the rest of Europe, targeting those seeking asylum<sup>21</sup> who may be intending to travel to the UK.

This could be framed as the UK making a voluntary contribution to the EU's ailing Solidarity Pool.<sup>22</sup> A key element of the EU's Migration Pact, the new Solidarity Pool is intended to support countries under migratory pressure by requiring other Member States to offer solidarity, namely by offering to relocate a number of asylum seekers or to provide financial assistance. With no EU Member States yet committed to relocating asylum seekers and all preferring to provide financial assistance, the UK has an opportunity to win credit with Med5 countries by providing life-support to this flagship policy. The UK could even offer to "buy up" solidarity commitments from the Calais Group states, including France, earning the UK symbolic and practical credit in Brussels.

Real solidarity, however, must take the form of a serious offer. We suggest the UK government expands the capacity of the safe route to the UK to up to 10,000 arrivals in this six month period, which would fulfil half of the Year 1 EU Solidarity Pool quota. While this would undeniably be a significant increase on the 900 or so people who have come through the UK-France route in the past eleven months, the UK should not see this as a bad deal. Under this arrangement, Europe would not only take a larger number of returns from the UK during the six-month circuit-breaker period, but the ultimate prize would be the significant, permanent and sustainable reduction in small boat arrivals thereafter.

To reduce pressure on post-arrival asylum accommodation and improve integration outcomes, the government could consider delivering 50% of these places through community sponsorship. By requiring that new arrivals have a UK-based "sponsor" to welcome and support them post-arrival, this would also help to target those with existing ties in the UK. Another option to reduce pressure on accommodation and government resources would be to lift the ban on asylum seekers working, for those who arrive by safe route from Europe. Rather than waiting in hotels for a decision, those asylum seekers who were able to work could contribute from day one and stand on their own feet.

This not only has the potential to generate savings, but is popular with voters across the political spectrum. 71% of the public support the principle that people who have applied for asylum in the UK should be allowed to work to support themselves after waiting six months for a decision on their claim. This increases to 79% of Labour voters, including 84% of those progressive 'switchers' and 73% of right 'switchers' who remain open to voting Labour.<sup>23</sup>

Learning from the pilot, it will take strong behavioural design and a strategic, transparent approach to communication if government is going to successfully incentivise applicants to the scheme to wait for legal entry rather than risk crossing by small boat or lorry. To keep applicants engaged, the government

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21 To avoid encouraging secondary movement, the scheme should not be available to those with status already or those who had been refused in Europe.

22 We suggest the UK use the Solidarity Pool to set targets for numbers rather than the mechanism for referrals. This would show solidarity with Europe, while the UK would retain control over who is selected and continue to operate the route via self-referral.

23 Polling was conducted online between the 11th and 12th of May 2026 by Convergent Opinion.

could use dashboards showing waiting times, regular lottery draws that bring an applicant's case to the front of the queue and SMS communications. Government could share relevant information to applicants who are waiting and those found ineligible for the scheme, such as the risks involved with using smugglers or the high likelihood of being returned to France if they travelled irregularly.

## Phase two: sustainable management

If the number of irregular crossings fall, as predicted, cooperation could be refocused on the sustainable management of the Channel.<sup>24</sup> Under this 'new normal', most arrivals would no longer be via irregular, dangerous journeys but instead a capped number of people arriving by safe and legal asylum routes. We should expect most asylum seekers to arrive via these managed routes from Europe and elsewhere, with a 'returns backstop' retained to act as a live deterrent for irregular travel.

### *Continued arrivals via managed routes from Europe & beyond*

To divert those intending to travel irregularly to the UK, once the six-month circuit-breaker period has ended the UK should retain permanent, capped asylum routes at scale from Europe and beyond, for those who are in need of protection.

We suggest the Government should aim to cap managed arrivals to the UK from Europe at 20,000 in the first year of sustainable management (after the 6 month circuit-breaker), which is around half of the number of arrivals by small boat in 2025. Initially, this could be matched to the EU's relocation quota under the Solidarity Pool, but in future years, the cap could be set as a fair proportion of overall EU asylum arrivals. Although this may sound like a large number, it would be a good deal for the UK if the overall approach produced a dramatic, then sustained reduction in irregular arrivals and a guarantee from Europe to accept returns of those who continued to travel by small boat.

While the public prefers lower numbers of managed arrivals (e.g. 5,000 arrivals per year is preferred over 40,000), the polling suggests that there was a stronger preference for achieving a significant sustained reduction in small boat crossings (i.e. 90% reduction).<sup>25</sup> While government will need to effectively make the case for managed arrivals as part of this approach, we can expect that a sustained reduction in small boats would improve public trust overall.

The purpose of an agreement should not be to eliminate asylum arrivals to the UK, but rather to eliminate *dangerous and uncontrolled* arrivals. Instead, the UK would welcome its fair share of asylum seekers through managed safe routes. Europe could equally ask why it should accept asylum seekers back from the UK when the UK is already benefiting from EU enforcement measures to stop asylum seekers transiting across Europe in the first place. To compare to European states, the UK ranked 12th in terms of the number of asylum

<sup>24</sup> At the end of the six-month circuit-breaker, if numbers do not fall, European partners should have the option to walk away, as other countries should not be expected to commit to such a high-level of returns indefinitely.

<sup>25</sup> Polling was conducted online between the 11th and 12th of May 2026 by Convergent Opinion.

seekers it accepted in 2025, when measured per capita.<sup>26</sup> The UK continuing to accept asylum arrivals via safe routes is an important part of this long-term arrangement functioning fairly.

As proposed in FGF's previous report, 'Asylum Management Centres: A new approach to tackle small boat crossings', the UK could pilot new methods of delivering safe routes as part of cooperation with Europe.<sup>27</sup> Asylum Management Centres could not only offer people seeking protection the opportunity to apply to access UK asylum, but also information and advice on their options, whether that's the possibility of family reunion in the UK; applying to stay and regularise their status where they are; or access to voluntary return to their country of origin.

Looking beyond Europe, we estimate around a third of small boat arrivals to the UK between April 2025 and March 2026 likely travelled via Libya, based on our analysis of nationalities claiming asylum in the UK and migratory patterns.<sup>28</sup> Conditions in this north African nation for asylum seekers are terrible, with the UN reporting widespread abuse and exploitation.<sup>29</sup> It is highly likely that most migrants transiting through Libya will become victims of trafficking - a reason currently given to block returns to France under the pilot - with many also experiencing arbitrary detention, torture and sexual violence. They are also likely to be from nationalities with high asylum grant rates, for example, 93% of people from Sudan were granted asylum at initial decision, in the year ending March 2026.<sup>30</sup>

There is currently no asylum system in Libya, and very limited access to protection in neighbouring Tunisia. The UK has only resettled very few people from Libya so far, mostly unaccompanied children. Intervening with key populations, such as Sudanese and Eritrean asylum seekers, long before people reach Calais would remove the dangerous journey to and across Europe for this group, offer capped access to protection, and address legal issues that have affected returns under the pilot. The UK could consider taking a specified number of asylum seekers who have been evacuated from Libya through the UNHCR's Emergency Transit Mechanism (ETM) and are awaiting resettlement in third countries. This could also act as a diplomatic incentive for Italy to support a new UK-Europe deal, as it sees a majority of people arriving via sea after travelling through Libya.

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26 Esme Kirk-Wade, '[Research Briefing: Asylum statistics](#)', House of Commons Library, 1 June 2026

27 Gardiner-Smith and Graham, 'Asylum Management Centres'.

28 Note that this is likely a conservative figure and is only indicative. Analysis considered which nationalities represented in Channel crossings are likely to have travelled via Libya based on known migration routes: Eritreans, Sudanese and Ethiopians. There are likely others who have travelled via Libya but cannot be identified in the analysis, as well as those within the identified nationalities who may have taken an alternate route.

29 United Nations, '[Migrants and refugees in Libya subjected to 'systematic' abuse](#)', 17 February 2026

30 Home Office, '[How many people are granted asylum in the UK?](#)', Accredited official statistics, 21 May 2026.

### ***Returns backstop with Europe***

In exchange for opening a permanent solidarity pathway, the UK should seek a 'returns backstop' with European partners through a safe third country agreement with France and other key Member States. This should allow the UK to return the majority of asylum seekers who continue to arrive by boat or lorry after the six-month circuit-breaker period and once the new permanent arrangement is in place.

While the expectation should be that the total number of arrivals by small boat or lorry becomes and remains low after the six month circuit-breaker, realistically it is likely that at least some people will continue to attempt to travel to the UK irregularly. In these cases, an ongoing 'returns backstop' would continue to act as a live deterrent.

The government would need to accept that this approach would see Europe take back via returns far fewer people than the UK accepts via inbound routes - a departure from the transactional "one-for-one" formula under the pilot. But if this happens it will be proof of success for the government rather than failure. Under a returns backstop arrangement, few returns to Europe means few people are attempting to make the crossing to the UK by lorry or small boat in the first place, with the price being that the UK takes its fair share through safe and managed routes.

### Note on Eurodac

A top priority for the UK since Brexit has been to replicate 'Eurodac' data-sharing. Eurodac is the EU's centralised biometric database, and enables participating states to more easily identify groups for return, including those who have passed through Europe; who already have a form of legal status in a European country; or who have been refused elsewhere. This is particularly important given it is thought that an increasing number of those travelling to Calais and then attempting to cross the Channel have already claimed asylum elsewhere in Europe.

A bespoke deal with Europe would not allow the UK to gain direct access to Eurodac, as it might if the UK government sought full participation in the EU's Asylum and Migration Management Regulation (AMMR). However negotiations to join the AMMR would be time-consuming, and require the UK to sign up wholesale to the EU's asylum *acquis*. While some EU Member States, including Denmark, have negotiated opt-outs, this would be difficult for the UK so soon after Brexit and we would be negotiating from a weaker position. To join the EU asylum *acquis*, the government would have to align UK rules and standards on reception, screening, asylum procedures and more.

In the long-run there may be advantages to the UK seeking to join the AMMR, but it is a much larger policy decision and while it is being contemplated, it will not deliver the quick results in the Channel the government is under pressure to achieve.

Instead a workaround could be the inclusion of a 'Eurodac liaison officer' in any new UK-Europe deal on migration, where officers from partner nations stationed in the UK gave access to the database.

# Lessons from the UK-France 'one-in, one-out' pilot

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To inform the design of the UK-Europe deal we have set out above (and indeed regardless of the shape of future cooperation with the EU), it is worth understanding what has been achieved with the UK-France pilot, where it has fallen short, and what can be learned.

The pilot established a framework to allow the UK to return those who arrive by small boat back to Europe for the first time since Brexit. Taking a 'routes for returns' approach, it also opened a new chapter in UK-France cooperation by seeking to tackle not only the 'supply' side of people smuggling, but also the demand for irregular routes by people seeking asylum.

While numbers of arrivals and returns under the deal were modest, they were restricted by design, with a total of 896 being admitted and 921 being returned under the deal as of June 2026.<sup>31</sup> At the end of year one, the pilot is now returning and admitting a steady number of people, with evidence to suggest it is starting to change smuggler behaviour.

Despite this achievement, the pilot failed to fully realise the opportunity to test and iterate new approaches to influencing migrant behaviour, from which the government could have learned a significant amount for the design of future schemes.

In migration, evidence is often poor and opportunities for useful testing are rare, particularly when it comes to learning what can incentivise the use of safe and legal routes by asylum seekers, and what can disincentivise use of smugglers. While the Cabinet Office has championed a 'Test, Learn and Grow' approach in Whitehall, this approach does not appear to have filtered through to the pilot. NGOs and international organisations working on the ground in Calais were not engaged systematically and had no feedback mechanism with the Home Office to share live issues with the scheme and help identify solutions that could be rapidly tested and rolled-out, despite helping to assist applicants to the inbound route and being a valuable and trusted source of information with migrants in Calais. Assumptions also went unchallenged: for example, it was believed that the inbound route would be overwhelmed but in reality, appetite for the scheme was sluggish.

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## Lessons on returns

A key barrier to scaling the deal exposed by the pilot is the UK's detention capacity: there is not enough space on the estate to detain all of those who the UK would return to France. While the Home Secretary recently announced plans to increase detention capacity by 40% (1,000 beds), we expect detention capacity to remain a limiting factor, at least in the short to medium-term.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Rajeev Syal, ['UK and France rewrite 'one in one out' treaty to stop removed migrants returning'](#), The Guardian, 22 June 2026.

<sup>32</sup> Home Office post on Facebook, ['45,000 more illegal migrants and foreign criminals will be deported or removed from the UK within the next decade'](#), 29 June 2026.

Dedicating the UK's detention estate primarily to asylum returns to France also comes with an opportunity cost to other Home Office priorities, such as the return of Foreign National Offenders. To address both of these dynamics, the government could consider a non-detained or community-first model in future, where detention is only used where there is a high risk of someone absconding or detention is deemed necessary immediately prior to removal.

A non-detained model is also preferable for people who have made the irregular journey, considering that most are likely to have genuine need for asylum and many are also likely to have experienced trafficking, and it is normal procedure in many returns cases. Currently, over 60% of people crossing the Channel are granted asylum in the UK.<sup>33</sup> It could also allow the government to return a higher proportion of arrivals back to Europe, as it is not suitable to detain some groups. In addition to moving to a non-detained model, the government should ensure that it is communicating with those identified for removal in a timely, more compassionate way.

Having a protection need or being a victim of trafficking should not in principle prevent people from being returned to France, which is signatory to the same key international frameworks on human rights, anti-trafficking and refugee protection as the UK. In the pilot, the Home Office faced ongoing legal challenges in relation to removing victims of trafficking to France in particular. In response, the Home Secretary amended Modern Slavery rules to prevent migrants who are due to be removed to France from being able to request a reconsideration of a negative decision, although this is now being tested in the courts. One issue that has emerged in legal proceedings is the availability and sufficiency of support for victims of trafficking in France. One option that the Home Office could explore is to work with partnering states to ensure that there is adequate support for returnees who have experienced trafficking.

Considering the vulnerability of those arriving to the UK by small boat or lorry, the government should expect that legal challenges will always feature to some degree in the removal of these individuals from the UK. In time, tested procedures and precedents will likely speed this up, but to prevent unnecessary delay, the Home Office should build this into its timelines for returns and ensure all other parts of the process are as quick as safely possible.

A key missed opportunity from the pilot was in testing the behavioural impact of the return element of the scheme. For the potential for removal to France to act as a deterrent, migrants need to be aware of it in the first place - but accounts from organisations working with those arriving by boat suggest most migrants were totally unaware of either the risk of return or the alternative possibility of safe, regular travel to the UK. We heard that some people arriving by small boat only found out about the scheme on the bus to detention in the UK. If the government intends to affect incentives and migrant behaviour, the first step must be to make sure migrants are aware of government schemes, both in terms of returns and safe routes - through better communication and information-sharing by trusted sources in Calais.

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<sup>33</sup> Note that this only covers initial asylum grant decisions, and not the outcome of any asylum appeals. See ['People crossing the English Channel in small boats'](#), The Migration Observatory, 31 March 2026

While there may be nervousness about communicating the existence of the inbound admission route and its potential to create a 'pull factor', it is better that official accurate information is communicated, pairing the existence of the safe route and return risk, rather than leaving an information vacuum for smugglers and others to fill. If the government's priority is to use the policy to divert and discourage irregular travel, it must make the scheme known.

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## Lessons on admissions to the UK

In contrast to the focus on returns, the potential of the inbound route to the UK appears to have been under-utilised during the pilot and to have been viewed as simply the quid-pro-quo for returns rather than an equal player in reducing dangerous journeys.

As with returns, the pilot failed to test how interventions can shift behaviour but in the case of the inbound route, opportunities were also missed to test operational delivery. For instance, the scheme has remained largely inaccessible to people from Eritrea who were the largest nationality group crossing the Channel in 2025 and had one of the highest asylum grant-rates.<sup>34</sup>

The key barrier for Eritreans, and many others, has been the requirement to provide original identification documents because they are unable to obtain passports from their government. Anecdotally, we've heard that those Eritreans who are aware of the scheme now perceive it as "not for them" because of these barriers. While the government must ensure that sufficient security checks are made, there are lessons that could be learnt from the Home Office's own family reunion application process and the EU's Dublin procedures about alternative ways to verify identity for this group. By comparison, a total of 1,737 Eritreans were granted visas to come to the UK through refugee family reunion in 2025.<sup>35</sup>

Initial assumptions that the route could be overwhelmed by applicants were also not borne out. In fact, at the outset the scheme struggled to attract applications, with lack of awareness appearing to be the biggest issue. While application 'windows' were built into the initial design allowing for the scheme to be paused, minimal attention was given to the need for awareness-raising among target migrant populations.

NGOs and international organisations could have played a greater role in supporting the government to successfully deliver the inbound route. As trusted third parties, NGOs can often disseminate information to migrants more successfully than government, and could have assisted migrants to access the route with legal advice and casework. However, there was no forum created to bring together NGOs, the UK government and French partners to share feedback or troubleshoot operational issues as well as build trust. Such engagement could have helped the government more quickly identify and resolve issues, such as technical bugs that prevented applicants from being able to verify their location as required by the application process.

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<sup>34</sup> Home Office Immigration System Statistics, '[Illegal entry routes to the UK summary tables](#)', year ending December 2025

<sup>35</sup> Home Office Immigration System Statistics, '[Refugee Family Reunion Visa grants detailed datasets](#)', year ending March 2026

As a result, resolvable issues went unaddressed. Applicants are required, for example, to complete their application in one sitting, which led to many giving up as they failed to complete the form in one go. A lack of communication with those waiting for a decision also contributed to people dropping out, as the scheme failed to offer transparency or certainty to those hoping to reach the UK - in contrast to the (often false) promises made by the smugglers. While the 'one-in, one-out' formulation made it difficult for the Home Office to offer concrete wait times to applicants (as is routinely done in similar schemes), regular progress updates via SMS or email could have helped incentivise applicants to wait for a decision, and ultimately a place on the scheme, rather than take the risk of crossing by small boat or lorry instead.

If access to inbound routes remains slow and glitchy, the government will not be able to compete with the smugglers' offer of swift, predictable entry to the UK. Future delivery relies on these routes being attractive alternatives if they are to operate successfully at scale.

#### Key lessons for future 'routes for returns' delivery

- **Take a 'Test, Learn and Grow' approach to future delivery**, particularly to understand how to best shift migrant behaviour and incentives towards regular pathways.
- **Invest in awareness-raising** of both the opportunity of an inbound route and likelihood of being returned.
- **Establish a cross-sectoral operational working group on the inbound route** with NGOs, UNHCR and French actors to test, learn and adapt delivery in real-time.
- **Establish a dedicated channel for communication within UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI)** for the inbound route.
- **Consider a non-detained model** in order to overcome limited detention capacity and scale future returns.
- **Build legal processes into the design and timescales** to prevent delays.
- **Resolve the issues with identity verification requirements** affecting access to the safe route to the UK for key nationalities.
- **Improve the online 'user journey'** for the asylum seekers applying from France.

# Conclusion

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Labour may have inherited the 'small boats crisis', but it is now a key test of its delivery in government. In pursuing a 'routes for returns' deal with Europe, the government is not only being led by evidence of what works, it is also signalling that rules-based cooperation with our allies to safeguard the right to seek asylum, offers a path to a more orderly, fair and safe system of refugee protection.

There are four months until the end of the current UK-France pilot. An incoming Prime Minister has a window of opportunity to replace it with something bigger and more effective - if they are prepared to prioritise the work to secure it.

