

Re-framing Immigration

How Labour Can Build Public Support for a
Progressive Migration Policy

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Executive summary

The political salience of both legal and illegal immigration has increased radically in recent years, with images of migrants crossing the channel in small boats appearing in the news on a near daily basis and increasing voter concern with overall net migration levels. The prevalence of this concern has been weaponised by the populist right for partisan gain. To this end, the immigration debate has been framed in negative terms, with immigrants often characterised as a ‘threat’ to Britain in political discourse. The Labour government has often reproduced such narratives by aligning with negative immigration frames, boosting the salience of immigration and increasing the electoral popularity of Reform UK. In order to win back voters, the government should reframe its public communication of immigration in a more positive light - highlighting the benefits of migration for Britain.

The purpose of this report is to identify effective political communication strategies that enable the Labour government to address legal and illegal migration in a way that is both electorally viable and ethically just. Rather than focusing on the empirical benefits of migration, which are already well documented, the report analyses how positive framing strategies could rebuild public trust in the government, neutralise the electoral challenge presented by Reform, and build support for compassionate, progressive migration policies.

This report is politically relevant for the government given the current adverse political climate - support for the Labour Party is declining rapidly, with polls showing that Labour would not win a general election if it were called now. The rapid success of Reform is being driven by immigration-related concerns and the public’s lack of trust in Labour to address the issue. Therefore, it is vital that Labour adopts a new immigration strategy, centring around positive public communications.

Immigration is increasingly becoming more salient to British voters. Anti-immigration attitudes are increasing in line with support for populist right-wing parties, which often run campaigns built from a hardline anti-immigration stance. This shift in public opinion correlates with the growing prominence of anti-immigration rhetoric from politicians, reproduced in the media, with immigrants portrayed as a ‘threat’ or a burden on society. However, attitudes are not uniformly negative - although people may oppose immigration as an abstract concept, they often support immigration when their societal or economic benefit is visible. In this manner, the public is most receptive to immigrants when their ‘contribution’ is emphasised, alongside highlighting ‘integration’ into communities.

Key recommendations

1. An 'Annual Migration Plan' presented to Parliament by the Home Secretary each year.
2. Confidently make a positive case for immigration in public communications, rather than adopting the populist right's negative immigration frame.
3. Implement a Contribution Test
4. Establish a Migration Contribution Fund
5. Frame public communications around the contribution and integration of migrants

Introduction

For decades, immigration has been one of the most fiercely contested and polarising issues within politics, in the UK and across the world. Increasing geopolitical and environmental instability in developing nations is pushing greater numbers of people to migrate, in the hope of escaping persecution or finding a better life. The problems pushing people away from their home nations are not likely to be resolved in the near future; and thus, immigration will be a constant phenomenon that Western nations must find a new way to deal with. Far-right populism, spearheaded by Reform, is pushing Labour towards a more right-wing immigration policy, vowing to crack down on all small boat arrivals and reduce overall net migration. Reform's stance entails highly contested policies, such as deporting people who have already been granted Indefinite Leave to Remain in the UK if they fail to meet strict new criteria. By failing to push back against Farage's narrative, Labour is legitimising his false characterisation of migrants as an existential problem. This research paper will suggest new political strategies to communicate illegal migration policies to the public, by understanding when the public is naturally sympathetic towards illegal migrants and the impacts of issue framing.

Current research details the economic impacts of migration, including their contribution to the labour market and workforce. Numerous think tanks, such as the IPPR¹ and Migration Observatory², have produced policy reports demonstrating the net positive fiscal benefit of migration. Polling data and publications from British Future³ also cover the public's attitude on migration, suggesting it may be more nuanced than current political discourse may suggest, especially when linked to migrants' contribution. This may provide an electoral incentive to embrace the benefits of welcoming hard-working migrants, shifting the narrative away from binary restrictive policies. There is also research on the rising popularity of the far-right in elections across the world, providing a broader ideological overview of opposition to broader immigration trends.

After a brief survey, I have identified a gap in the literature regarding the impact of the framing of immigration in the UK. Research is thorough on the empirical benefits of migration; thus, my report will centre on the strategies to communicate nuanced and compassionate immigration policies, embracing the benefits of migration whilst addressing the concerns of voters. I will focus on how the framing of issues in

¹ Morris, M (2020). *Building a post-Brexit immigration system for the economic recovery*. London, Institute for Public Policy Research

² Fernandez-Reino, M. Brindle, B (2025). *Migrants in the UK labour market: an overview* (online). <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migrants-in-the-uk-labour-market-an-overview/> [Accessed 12/1/2026]

³ Ballinger, S. (2024). *Immigration and the election: Time to choose*. London, British Future.

political communications can shape public opinion, and how this can be utilised to build public support for policies.

The political problem of migration

The political environment for Labour is unusually unfavourable; following a landslide victory in 2024, Labour now faces an uphill struggle to regain public support, trailing behind the seemingly inexorable success of Reform UK in national polls. Immigration has quickly become a stark and polarising dividing line in UK politics; with the salience of the issue in voters' minds and in political discourse ever-increasing. In order to recapture the support lost to Reform, the government must convince voters that it is able to tackle the issue of immigration - this requires a new, decisive strategy in immigration communications. The political discourse surrounding immigration is increasingly hostile with immigrants framed negatively and characterised as a 'threat'. Rather than allowing Reform to set the agenda and following Farage's narrative regarding immigration, Labour must push back - making a positive case for the tangible benefits of migration, whilst simultaneously addressing the everyday issues that are pushing voters towards the populist and incredible solutions of Reform. As long as Labour allows Reform to set the political agenda in its advantage, Reform's support will likely continue to grow.

Negative attitudes towards migration are increasing rapidly throughout society. According to YouGov polling, in March 2022, 25% of people thought that immigration had had an overall negative impact on the UK. By July 2025, this has increased to 49% of people⁴. Moreover, the salience of immigration has also increased substantially - in May 2021, 26% of people believed immigration to be the most important issue facing the country, however, by December 2025, this has reached 51% (*Figure 1*)⁵. This highlights the pressing need for Labour to address immigration as a political issue, given that it will significantly inform the vote choice of a majority of the electorate.

⁴ YouGov. *Has immigration in the past 10 years been good for Britain?* YouGov Public Data tracker. [Accessed 6/1/2026]. <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/has-immigration-in-the-past-10-years-been-good-for-britain>

⁵ YouGov. *The most important issues facing the country.* YouGov Public Data tracker. [Accessed 6/1/2026]. <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/society/trackers/the-most-important-issues-facing-the-country>



Figure 1 – Respondents who cited ‘Immigration & Asylum’ as the most important issue facing the country (YouGov)⁶

This change in attitudes aligns with the increasing presence of right-wing populist parties, such as Reform, in the UK’s media and political environment. As the popularity of such parties has increased, the media coverage of their policies and perspectives has increased accordingly - meaning that anti-immigration narratives have been disseminated to a substantial proportion of society. This correlation implies that exposure to anti-immigration rhetoric has a significant impact on public opinion, influencing voters to view migrants through a negative frame. This does not just have political significance, but also an everyday and tangible impact in everyday life. Namely, anti-immigrant views in political discourse contributed to, and perhaps inflamed, hostility towards migrants in communities - exemplified by anti-immigrant protests outside hotels housing migrants in the summer of 2024, and the Southport riots in 2023.

Anti-immigration attitudes pose a significant problem for Labour’s electoral prospects. Labour’s approval ratings are declining rapidly in the polls; if a general election were called today, only 19% of people would vote for Labour, according to YouGov’s latest polling (*Figure 2*)⁷. The government’s declining popularity can be perhaps attributed to the sudden success of Reform. In March 2022, only 4% of people said that they would vote for Reform in the next general election, yet by December 2025, this had increased to 26% - topping the polls, and casting significant doubt on the prospect of the Labour government’s re-election (YouGov).

⁶ YouGov. *The most important issues facing the country*. YouGov Public Data tracker. [Accessed 6/1/2026]. <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/society/trackers/the-most-important-issues-facing-the-country>

⁷ YouGov. *Voting intention*. YouGov Public Data Tracker. [Accessed 6/1/2026]. <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/voting-intention>

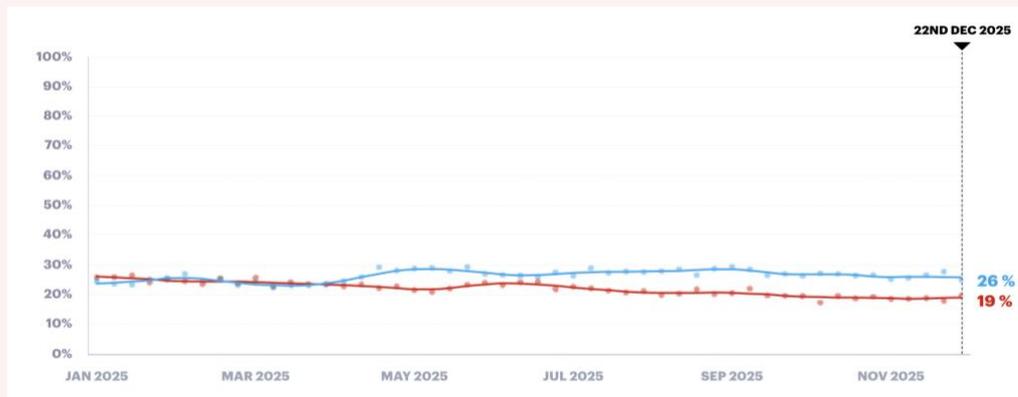


Figure 2 – Voting intention for the Labour Party (red) or Reform UK (blue)⁸

The correlation between Labour’s declining electoral popularity and the increasing salience of immigration may be explained by valence voting. Broadly, this thesis states that voters choose the most competent politician or party, evaluating candidates on their ability to govern effectively, particularly regarding the issue they deem most salient⁹. Critically, Labour is not considered to be competent on the issue of immigration, depressing their electoral support amongst the substantial portion of the electorate who believe immigration is the ‘most important’ issue. To elucidate, 77% of people believe that the government is handling the issue of immigration ‘badly’¹⁰. Moreover, only 10% of people believe that Labour is most competent on immigration; conversely, 27% of people believe that Reform is the most competent on immigration.

⁸ YouGov. *Voting intention*. YouGov Public Data Tracker. [Accessed 6/1/2026].

<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/voting-intention>

⁹ Clarke, H.D., Sanders, D., Stewart, M.C. and Whiteley, P. (2004). Chapter 1: Introduction: Political Choice in Britain. In: *Political Choice in Britain*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, pp.1–16.

¹⁰ YouGov. *How the government is handling the issue of immigration in the UK*. YouGov Public Data Tracker. Accessed 6/1/2025. <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/how-the-government-is-handling-the-issue-of-immigration-in-the-uk>

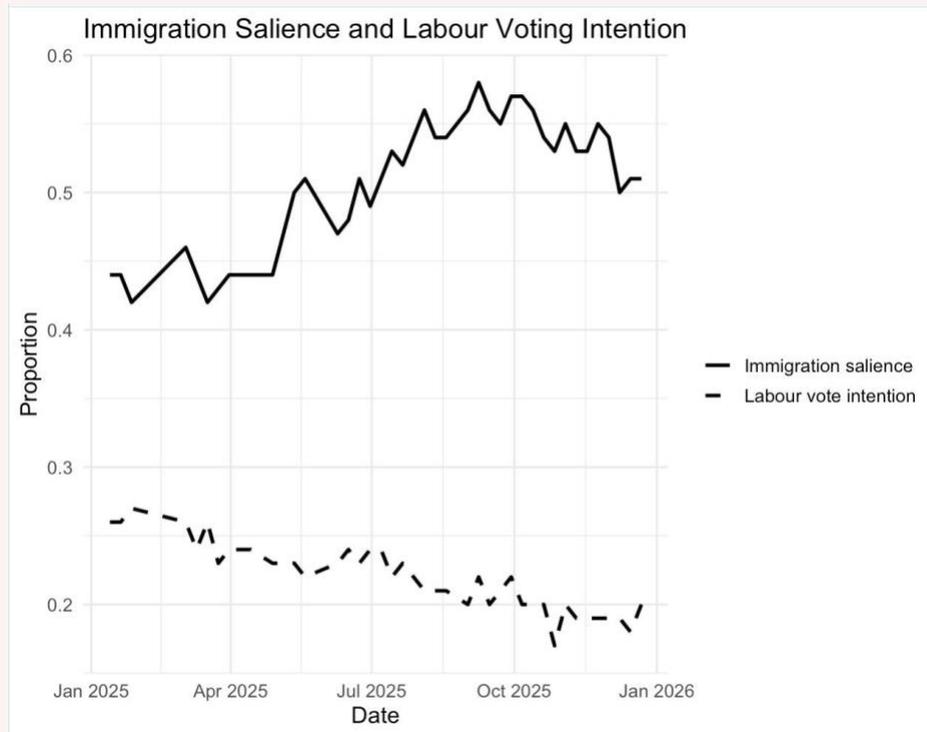


Figure 3 – Graph to show the negative relationship between the salience of immigration and Labour voting intention

To visually show the importance of tackling the issue, I have conducted data analysis and created a graph (*Figure 3*) displaying the negative correlation between the salience of immigration against the voting intention for Labour. In order to recover its electoral support, it is vital that Labour neutralises the issue of immigration - convincing voters that it is competent at handling the issue. The current strategy regarding both immigration policy, and political communications regarding immigration, have proven ineffective, with support continuing to deteriorate. A fresh, positive approach is needed.

Understanding public attitudes to migration

The ideological centre

Although political and media discourse often centres around the ideological extremes, this is not representative of British public opinion as a whole - in fact, most people occupy the ideological centre regarding immigration. ‘Balancers’ form the main basis of the electorate, acknowledging the economic and cultural benefits of immigration, whilst also exhibiting concerns about the pace of change and the impact on public services¹¹. This was encapsulated by one participant in a focus group conducted and cited by the authors of this report: “I think immigration’s positive for work, particularly within the NHS... but maybe some of the problems have been in the town centre... neighbourhoods have got worse”. Rather than a binary restrictionist policy, this focus group suggests that the electorate would likely respond positively to a more nuanced approach to both immigration policy and communications. Moreover, the electorate would be receptive to a more positive framing of immigration; Labour should be unafraid to confidently make the case for the benefits of migration - a perspective that is often purposefully silenced by right-wing populist parties, such as Reform. The government should target this ideological middle group with a pragmatic immigration strategy, implementing more controls, whilst ensuring fairness and justice for migrants.

Furthermore, public attitudes are more favourable towards the economic and cultural contribution of migrants than they were a decade ago - suggesting that attitudes can be shifted gradually over time through political messaging. This suggests that the public will be receptive to messaging which emphasises the contribution of migrants. A strategy which facilitates controlled legal migration, combined with an integration plan, could be well-received and effective.

Public trust

However, public confidence in politicians to handle immigration is declining across the partisan divide - 70% of people are dissatisfied with how the previous Conservative government handled the issue, with criticism from a coalition of different perspectives¹². Whilst 54% of people criticised the lack of control over small boat channel crossings, 28% of people criticised the previous government for creating

¹¹ Buckley, M and Green, K. (2019). *Open and Ethical: Building a Fairer Immigration System*. London, Fabian Society.

¹² Ballinger, S. (2024). *Immigration and the election: Time to choose*. London, British Future.

a negative and fearful environment for migrants. The lack of trust in mainstream parties' ability to handle the issue of immigration is likely a significant factor driving support for populist outsiders, such as Reform. In order to regain these votes, it is essential that Labour regains control over the political issue and discourse surrounding immigration, changing its public perception regarding competence. Nevertheless, this cross partisan attitude breakdown elucidates the strategy that Labour should adopt; the majority of people express a preference for having 'control' over the UK's borders, but are less concerned about reducing the numbers of migrants entering the UK. Tackling the small boats crisis in a humane and compassionate way would address the key concerns of both the ideological left and right. The government should be more concerned with an effective policy that decreases perceptions of chaos and incompetence, and less worried about the ideological complaints and sensationalist policies of the far right. A pragmatic, evidence-based policy strategy would boost Labour's immigration 'valence' vote - making the party seem competent on the issue across the ideological spectrum. This policy should be communicated in a positive light, portraying values of control as well as compassion.

Public sympathies

A closer examination of polling shows that attitudes to immigration are not uniform and vary based on the type of migrant. To exemplify, 52% of people support reducing immigration overall; and yet, conversely, 52% of people also support increasing the immigration of nurses, 42% of care workers, and 39% of people favour increasing the immigration of agricultural workers⁷ (immigration and election). This contradicts previous research finding that people are more favourable towards highly skilled and highly educated migrants than low-skilled migrants¹³. Instead, this polling suggests that the electorate prioritises social and economic contribution over skill level, pragmatically supporting the immigration of migrants for essential, low skilled jobs to fill workforce shortages.

The government should incorporate this insight into its migration strategy; abandoning the longstanding prioritisation of attracting the 'brightest and the best', and instead highlighting the contribution and the benefits of immigrants in all sectors of work. Although people may oppose immigration as an abstract concept, they often support immigration in personal circumstances, when the benefits are made apparent. The government could integrate this into their political strategy by centring communications on personal stories of migrant contribution, rather than focusing discourse on abstract migration rates, dehumanising migrants and reducing them to numbers.

¹³ Richards, L, Fernandez-Reino, M, Blinder, S (2025). *UK Public Opinion toward Immigration: Overall Attitudes and Level of Concern*. The Migration Observatory.

The public is also more supportive when migrants are perceived as attempting to integrate themselves into British society, exemplified by learning English or engaging in their community¹⁴. This suggests a strategy of political communications featuring personal stories of migrants who have become active contributing members of their communities - enriching and simultaneously integrating into British society, diminishing public concerns regarding cultural change. Moreover, the government's border control policy must be harmonised with policies to support integration into British society - reducing community tensions and friction between newly arrived migrants and citizens born in Britain.

Concerningly, an ethnic hierarchy in migrant preferences has been observed¹⁵. Migrants who are white, English speaking and come from European or Christian countries are viewed more favourably and sympathetically than non-white migrants from non-European or Muslim countries. These underlying racial preferences may explain the stronger opposition to migrants arriving in small boats - typically male, non-white and coming from non-European countries. These attitudes necessitate a societal change in the perceptions of different ethnicities and cultures within Britain. This will require a long-term strategy adopted and advanced by all major parties, championing multiculturalism and diversity as a source of pride for Britain. This will be difficult to achieve through immigration policy, as it will require an educational campaign. Nevertheless, calling out extreme rhetoric and policies, as well as countering harmful racial stereotypes, may be a first step in preventing these negative attitudes from spreading further across society. Labour should be unafraid to challenge and push back against Reform's rhetoric if it perpetuates harmful attitudes - Keir Starmer's description of Reform's deportation policies as 'racist' is a successful example of this strategy, which should be pursued further.

¹⁴ Buckley, M and Green, K. (2019). *Open and Ethical: Building a Fairer Immigration System*. London, Fabian Society.

¹⁵ Richards, L, Fernandez-Reino, M, Blinder, S (2025). *UK Public Opinion toward Immigration: Overall Attitudes and Level of Concern*. The Migration Observatory.

Political framing

Prevalent immigration frames

Previous research has explored how the media constructs its narrative regarding a particular topic, in order to ‘frame’ the issue in a certain manner. Entman’s (1993) work conceptualises framing as the selection of “some aspects of a perceived reality” in order to “make them more salient in a communicating text” and promote a particular definition of a problem¹⁶. By elevating some considerations in importance and excluding others, the media and politicians can shape how readers view and interpret certain political issues. The media’s power to shape public opinion is relevant given that it reproduces politicians’ immigration narratives, particularly those on the ideological right.

This research has been extended by the work of Erbel et al. (2018)¹⁷, which examined how issue specific frames have been utilised by European media to present migrants as a threat to the host country. These frames have substantial impacts: Erbel et al. document a strong correlation between the volume of negative economic coverage, and citizens’ perceptions of immigration related threats. This supports the thesis that anti-immigration attitudes amongst the British electorate have been increased by the negative framing of the issue in political discourse. By perpetuating these frames in their political discourse, Labour has legitimised them for the public - causing more voters to view immigrants as a threat which must be addressed, pushing them towards the populist solutions of Reform.

Allen et al. (2013)¹⁸ discussed the dominance of problem-oriented media frames regarding immigration, with the ‘impacts’ and ‘illegality / abuse’ frames most common - explicitly casting immigrants as a threat to Britain’s social and cultural identity. Given the significant power of framing, these characterisations of migrants have likely had a substantial impact on public opinion, contributing to the rapid increase in anti-migration attitudes, and the increasing salience of immigration for voters.

¹⁶ Entman, R.M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), pp.51–58. doi:0.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x.

¹⁷ Eberl, J.-M., Meltzer, C.E., Heidenreich, T., Herrero, B., Theorin, N., Lind, F., Berganza, R., Boomgaarden, H.G., Schemer, C. and Strömbäck, J. (2018). The European Media Discourse on Immigration and Its effects: a Literature Review. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 42(3), pp.207–223. Doi:10.1080/23808985.2018.1497452.

¹⁸ Allen, W. and Blinder, S. (2013). *Migration in the News: Portrayals of Immigrants, Migrants, Asylum Seekers and Refugees in National British Newspapers, 2010-2012*. [online] Migration Observatory. Available at: https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Report-Migration_News.pdf [Accessed 6/1/2026].

Piemontese (2025)¹⁹ has examined media discourse regarding immigration, arguing that the media uses politicised channel-crossing imagery to frame illegal migration as a border control crisis. This has been constructed through the persistent pairing of ‘illegal migrant’ with ‘criminal’, creating an implicit cognitive connection for readers. Similarly, Cariola (2025)²⁰ highlights the role of sensationalist and emotive headlines in depicting migrants as threats, with frames operationalised through specific key words and images to accentuate the intended perspective. Political communications have contributed to this - politicians create the ‘threat’ narratives which are reproduced in the media.

An alternative framing strategy

In short, the current political discourse surrounding immigration is particularly negative - with immigrants framed as a threat to Britain’s culture, security and economy. This has likely contributed to boosting the salience of immigration and fuelling anti-immigration attitudes, harming Labour’s electoral prospects and increasing the success of Reform. Common anti-immigrant rhetoric entails framing migrants as an existential ‘threat’, with politicians operationalising dehumanising language such as a “flood” or “wave” of migrants²¹ (frame works). By doing so, politicians imply that there is something dangerous or ‘other’ about migrants. This creates an ‘us vs them’ mindset, othering migrants and stoking division. In order to gradually shift public attitudes towards a more pro-immigration stance, the topic of immigration can be framed differently, in order to appeal to the public’s natural sympathies. Namely, by incorporating an ‘immigrants as us’ approach into political communications, Labour could promote the benefits of migration to the public, emphasising the benefits and contribution of migrants to British society and culture.

Specific framing strategies can be operationalised in communications to activate the ‘immigrants as us’ mindset. Primarily, this can be done by focusing on moral arguments in areas of controversy, emphasising values of shared humanity to generate an empathetic and understanding response in voters. This could be effective at generating support for a more compassionate approach to the small boats crisis - portraying illegal migrants as vulnerable and desperate to help their families, rather than characterising them as criminals and dangerous. Moreover, emphasising the

¹⁹ Piemontese, S. (2025). *The narrative construction of migrant irregularity in the United Kingdom Representation and narratives in media, politics, and civil society*. [online] Available at: https://i-claim.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/The-narrative-construction-of-migrant-irregularity-in-the-United-Kingdom-I-CLAIM_CR_WP4.pdf [Accessed 6/1/2026].

²⁰ Cariola, L. (2025). *Media Framing Fuels Refugee Stigma*. [online] Psychology Today. Available at: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/third-culture-and-migration-experiences/202507/media-framing-fuels-refugee-stigma> [Accessed 6/1/2026].

²¹ FrameWorks Institute. *4 Insights for Navigating the Political Discourse on Immigration*. Thought Pieces. 20 February 2025. <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/articles/4-insights-for-navigating-the-political-discourse-on-immigration/> [Accessed 6/1/2026]

collective benefits of migration for Britain can be more effective at building support on a societal level than focusing on individual stories of personal contribution - helping to change perceptions of migrants as a whole demographic group. Individual stories can have the unintended consequence of reinforcing the notion that only some immigrants are 'worthy' and deserving of our help, contributing to the 'othering' of different migrant groups (such as illegal or low-skilled migrants).

Moreover, the electorate is particularly responsive to frames emphasising contribution. People are more likely to see immigration as something good when values like hard work and duty are highlighted²² - countering right-wing narratives of migrants free-riding on the taxpayer. Exposure to individual stories can build a personal and emotional narrative, helping to humanise migrants as people, allowing the public to observe similarities and empathise with the struggles and hopes of migrants. The most effective narratives have been found to be factual ones, countering the misinformation often disseminated on social media by political figures. Communicating statistics, such as the number of doctors from overseas working in NHS hospitals, and then asking people to consider the alternative of such jobs going unfulfilled is effective at changing public attitudes regarding the necessity and importance of immigration for Britain.

²² University of Cambridge (2025), "*British attitudes to immigrants from Europe can be shifted by relatable messaging, study finds*," Cambridge Stories [Accessed 6/1/2026].
<https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/British-attitudes-immigration-study>

Current policy analysis

The immigration White Paper: policy

On the 20th of November 2025, the government published its immigration White Paper, detailing a series of changes tightening restrictions on immigration.

This entailed a doubling of the permanent settlement qualifying period to 10 years, although this can be reduced for those who make a strong contribution to society or their community - for example, those who work in public services, those who pay a rate of tax and those who complete voluntary work.

The volunteering aspect of this policy successfully frames immigrants as net contributors to Britain, countering narratives often pushed by right-wing figures which frame migrants as free-riders and unwilling to work. This echoes a suggestion put forward by Thom Brooks²³, described as a ‘contribution test’. This was designed to highlight the positive contribution of migrants on a local and personal scale, fostering integration within communities. To exemplify, skilled economic migrants could provide CV advice to British jobseekers, facilitating positive interaction between migrants and citizens born in Britain - a vital first step in breaking down media stereotypes about migrants, allowing the British public to view migrants as beneficial to their lives. If people interact with a migrant on an individual basis, they are more likely to view all migrants as humans similar to themselves, considering their situation with greater compassion. This contrasts more negative frames of migrants, which lead to viewing migrants simply as a number, or believing in false stereotypes of migrants as criminals or societal burdens.

The optional nature of this volunteering work is important, ‘nudging’ but not obliging migrants to be active participants in their community. A contribution of 10 hours a year per migrant is very small to the individual, but on a societal scale, this would have a significant positive impact on the local economy, and in communities, for example, resulting in cleaner public parks. The policy of volunteering to expedite citizenship, if promoted thoroughly to migrants, could be highly effective at improving integration, as well as benefiting local economies. This also signals a more positive immigration frame, in line with public attitudes and sympathies, emphasising migrant contribution and societal benefit - which are likely to gradually shift attitudes to become more pro-migration.

Furthermore, migrants will have to meet certain criteria in order to be granted the right to permanent settlement, including: learning English to a high standard, having a clean criminal record, and volunteering in the community. This aligns with the

²³ Brooks, T (2022). *New Arrivals: A Fair Immigration Plan for Labour*. Fabian Society.

public's attitudes by boosting integration and participation in British society - improving the public's perception of migrants as active members and contributors, rather than free-riders. As well as border control policies, the government's migration strategy should incorporate schemes to help migrants settle into their new communities, reducing friction due to cultural and practical differences. The plans laid out in the White Paper perhaps signal a start towards this, however, migrants must be helped to meet these requirements through government initiatives, such as that of learning English - preventing them from feeling neglected and isolated from their communities, with impossibly high requirements for permanent residency.

The expedited route to permanent residency for NHS doctors and nurses after 5 years reflects public preferences for migrants who clearly contribute to Britain and bring societal or economic benefit. This supports the frame of migrants as contributors, encouraging the migration of highly skilled workers - aligned with previous evidence showing that the public prefers migrants with high levels of both skill and education. This policy should be communicated positively, highlighting the vital work of immigrants within the NHS through campaigns featuring personal stories. However, this policy could be expanded to encompass expedited pathways for migrants working in essential sectors with workforce shortages, such as agriculture and care work. This aligns with polling, showing that the public supports migrants working in jobs with a high societal value and necessity, prioritising this over high skill levels. Labour should pragmatically accept the need for overseas workers to fill workforce shortages in a diverse range of societal sectors and encourage the immigration of both high and low skilled workers.

The immigration White Paper: communications

This White Paper has framed migration in a more positive light, with the important themes of contribution and integration emphasised in line with public support. This marks a welcome change from harmful rhetoric in the past, which 'othered' migrants and characterised them as a cultural and societal threat to Britain. Shabana Mahmood described the new system as one that "prioritises contribution, integration, and respect for the British sense of fair play" - emphasising the key benefits of migration. She stated that "migration will always be a vital part of Britain's story", pushing back on the far-right's frequent calls for zero net migration, and refusing to legitimise the validity or morality of this solution.

Keir Starmer arguably made a strategic communication mistake in his now infamous 'island of strangers' speech - a mistake he has since admitted to. This was a bad political decision, irrespective of the dangerous historical connotations, serving to legitimise Farage's scapegoating and othering of migrants, hence boosting the salience of the issue of immigration. There is a pressing need to de-escalate rhetoric

regarding immigration and treat it as a normal political issue like any other - rather than dealing with it as an urgent matter of existential threat.

One manner of doing so is calling out extreme rhetoric and language, wherever it arises, refusing to normalise harmful narratives. This was demonstrated at the Labour Party Conference in 2025, in which Keir Starmer labelled Reform's plan to deport British citizens as 'racist'. This set a moral dividing line between Labour and Reform - distinguishing concerns about high levels of migration from amoral and discriminatory policies. This may be effective at preventing 'balancer' voters from being attracted to Reform UK; emphasising the extremism of Reform's stance will likely dissuade these more moderate voters. Labour should not be too concerned about alienating Reform leaning voters through such a strategy, for the fear that they will believe Labour is calling them racist by implication. The strategy to differentiate Reform's discriminatory policies from legitimate concerns is an important one to prevent this implication. The more extreme Reform voters who may be offended by Labour's criticism are likely too ideologically close to Reform to vote Labour - there would be little point in chasing the vote of such voters.

This may signal a change in communication strategy, pushing back against Reform's narrative and refusing to let Nigel Farage dictate the terms of the immigration debate. Hatred against migrants has no place in Britain, nor in British politics - it is essential that this is not normalised by mainstream parties and is called out in strong terms.

Policy recommendations

1. An Annual Migration Plan, presented to Parliament by the Home Secretary each year.

- This idea was discussed in British Future's report²⁴.
- This enables the public to recognise that the government is taking the issue seriously, increasing trust in government and perceptions of competence.
- It would also lay out clear standards and goals for the year, which the government can be judged against. It would help to mitigate unrealistic expectations from the public, such as eradicating small boat crossings completely in one year.
- It would also normalise immigration as a policy issue, rather than allowing Reform UK to use it as a weapon of a societal culture war.

2. Confidently make a positive case for immigration in public communications, rather than adopting the populist right's negative frame.

- The government must refuse to legitimise the claims of the populist right about migrants being the reason for the country's issues (e.g. lack of NHS appointments).
- By pushing back on this narrative and being honest about the real root causes, it will decrease the salience of immigration as an issue.
- This also includes calling out harmful and discriminatory policies and narratives, wherever they arise - refusing to normalise prejudicial attitudes.
- In turn, this will likely decrease the electoral success of Reform UK, whose popularity is driven by misleading immigration claims.
- This will also de-escalate the terms of the political debate, helping to resolve frictions between migrant communities and local British-born citizens.
- However, this has to be navigated with caution - it is politically untenable to simply tell people that their views on migrants are incorrect without setting out an alternative and well-reasoned vision, as they will not respond in a positive and receptive manner.

²⁴ Ballinger, S. (2024). *Immigration and the election: Time to choose*. London, British Future.

3. Implement a Contribution Test

- As described earlier, this entails expanding or promoting the government's recent proposed policy of completing voluntary work to expedite citizenship.
- This was set out by Thom Brooks²⁵ - migrants could complete 10 hours of voluntary work a year, to speed up their pathway to permanent residency or citizenship.
- This would strongly uphold the 'contribution' frame in both policy and communications - helping the public to understand the benefits of migration.

4. Establish a Migration Contribution Fund

- As described by Thom Brooks²⁰ in his report, this fund would be composed of the profits made on immigration application fees.
- This would be directed towards communities to fund local projects, for example, a new bus station, or new play equipment for children in a local park.
- This would include signage, detailing that these new developments were funded by migrants.
- This would make tangible the financial and social contribution that migrants make to the UK, challenging narratives of migrants as a 'drain' on public resources.
- This supports the contribution and integration frames, aligning with the public's natural sympathies to generate support for migration and harmonise community relations with recent arrivals.

5. Frame public communications around the contribution and integration of migrants

- The public is most receptive to migrants when they contribute to and integrate into society.
- When discussing migration, highlight migrants' contribution to the UK on a societal and individual scale - whether this is financially, socially or culturally.

²⁵ Brooks, T (2022). *New Arrivals: A Fair Immigration Plan for Labour*. Fabian Society.

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- The ‘contribution’ frame is most effective at promoting pro-migration attitudes amongst the electorate, by highlighting tangibly the benefits of migration for themselves and their community.
 - This will reduce the appeal of far-right rhetoric, labelling migrants as drains on the system, wanting to free-ride on the work of British people.
 - Emphasising and supporting the integration of migrants into society will reduce public concerns regarding cultural change.

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