Labour’s pledges on migration: the data

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After two years in government, has Labour made progress towards its pledges on migration? In this piece, we examine six pledges – to bring down net migration, lower reliance on overseas workers, reduce small boat arrivals, clear the asylum backlog, end the use of asylum hotels, and accelerate the removal of people without legal status in the UK.

Both net migration and the number of foreign workers coming to the UK have declined sharply during Labour's time in office to date. These trends were in line with the government's commitments though they were largely driven by policies first introduced by the previous government, which led to a sharp increase in net migration followed by a sharp decline. Returns have increased under the current government, and the number of asylum seekers in hotels has fallen. The asylum backlog of people awaiting initial decisions has declined as well, though it has been overtaken by a rapidly growing asylum appeals backlog in the courts. Finally, the number of people arriving by small boat fell between July 2024 and September 2026, though a sharp decline in the last year came after a period of increases following the election.

The full impact of some of Labour's policies on migration still remains to be seen. A key piece of legislation related to enforcement – the Border Security, Asylum, and Immigration Act – became law in December 2025. As of March 2026, the UK's asylum system has shifted to a model of temporary rather than permanent protection, with refugees granted temporary status that needs to be reviewed every 30 months rather than placed on a direct route to settlement. In June 2026, the government introduced a

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The data allow us to track general progress on key pledges, though they do not always tell us everything we might want to know. For example, it is often difficult to know how much impact specific policies had on the trends in the data. In addition, the government's success or failure in relation to some of its broader aims cannot be assessed at all using public data. This commentary explains what the data do and do not tell us about the Labour government's progress towards its goals.

Pledge 1: Bringing down net migration

Net migration to the UK – the difference between immigration and emigration – fell to 171,000 in 2025. That was 48% lower than a year before, and 82% below the 2023 peak. Net migration had reached record levels after Brexit, rising to 944,000 in the year ending 31 March 2023.

Net migration was already expected to decline from 2024 onwards, regardless of the change in government or any new policies. That was for two reasons – immigration fell after the introduction of visa restrictions by the previous government, and emigration of international students rose following a boom in arrivals in 2021-23 (though a higher-than-expected share stayed in the UK).

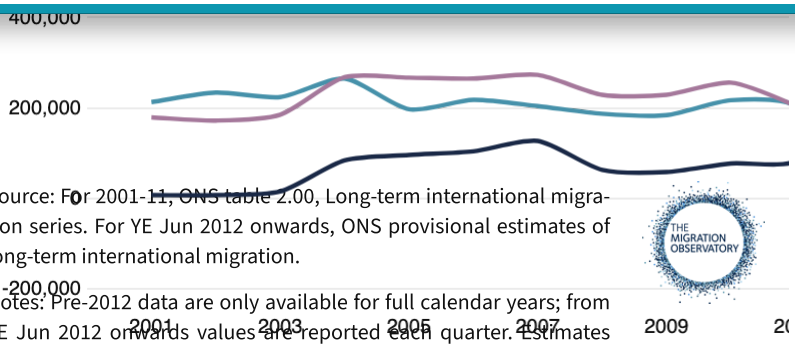
Figure 1

Net migration fell to 171,000 in 2025, 48% lower than the year before

Net migration to the UK, by year and citizenship (**Total**, **Non-EU**, **EU**)

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Source: For 2001-11, ONS table 2.00, Long-term international migration series. For YE Jun 2012 onwards, ONS provisional estimates of long-term international migration.

Notes: Pre-2012 data are only available for full calendar years; from YE Jun 2012 onwards values are reported each quarter. Estimates before YE Jun 2012 are based on the International Passenger Survey; from YE Jun 2012 onwards they are experimental admin-based statistics. Both come with uncertainty and can be revised. Data on UK nationals are not shown but are included in totals.

The government has maintained the restrictions introduced by the Conservatives in 2024. These include a ban on partners and children of care workers and most overseas students, the removal of the going rate discount for migrants in shortage occupations, and a rise in the skilled worker salary threshold from £26,200 to £38,700. Labour raised that threshold again in 2025 to £41,700 per year (roughly in line with inflation). The government has maintained the £29,000 threshold for family migrants.

The government introduced new restrictions after an immigration White Paper in May 2025. In July 2025, it closed the Skilled Worker route for social care, made some middle-skilled occupations ineligible for work visas, and ended the ability of remaining middle-skilled workers to bring dependants to the UK. In September 2025, the government restricted refugee family reunion. In November 2025, it announced changes that will see many migrants face considerably longer waits before being granted permanent settlement in the UK, though it remains uncertain whether these proposals will have any impact on migration patterns (for more details, see Changes to settlement: what do they mean?).

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reliance on overseas workers

Labour has said that UK employers should reduce their reliance on overseas workers, and that too many work visas had been issued in previous years. Most of the growth in work migration after 2021 came from the health and care industry, particularly after care workers were added to the shortage occupation list in 2022.

The Conservative government introduced restrictions on foreign workers in early 2024 – a rise in the minimum income threshold for Skilled Worker visas, a ban on care workers bringing their partners and children to the UK, and increased scrutiny of employers applying to sponsor care worker visas. These were maintained under Labour. The government announced further restrictions in May 2025. The care worker route was closed to new applicants coming from abroad in July 2025, though people remain able to switch into it from within the UK until 2028. The skills threshold for Skilled Worker visas has also been raised to degree-level. Middle-skilled jobs related to the Industrial Strategy or critical infrastructure can still qualify based on a new temporary shortage list, which is subject to periodic review by the MAC. People coming to the UK for these middle-skilled jobs are no longer eligible to bring dependants with them.

In addition to the new restrictions, the government pledged to improve training and reduce demand for overseas workers by linking policies on immigration and skills. The MAC has been tasked to review demand for overseas visas in key sectors, proactively monitor sectors which experience skill shortages, and collaborate with other institutions on labour market

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year ending 30 June 2026. That was 79% less than two years before, during the last year of Conservative government.

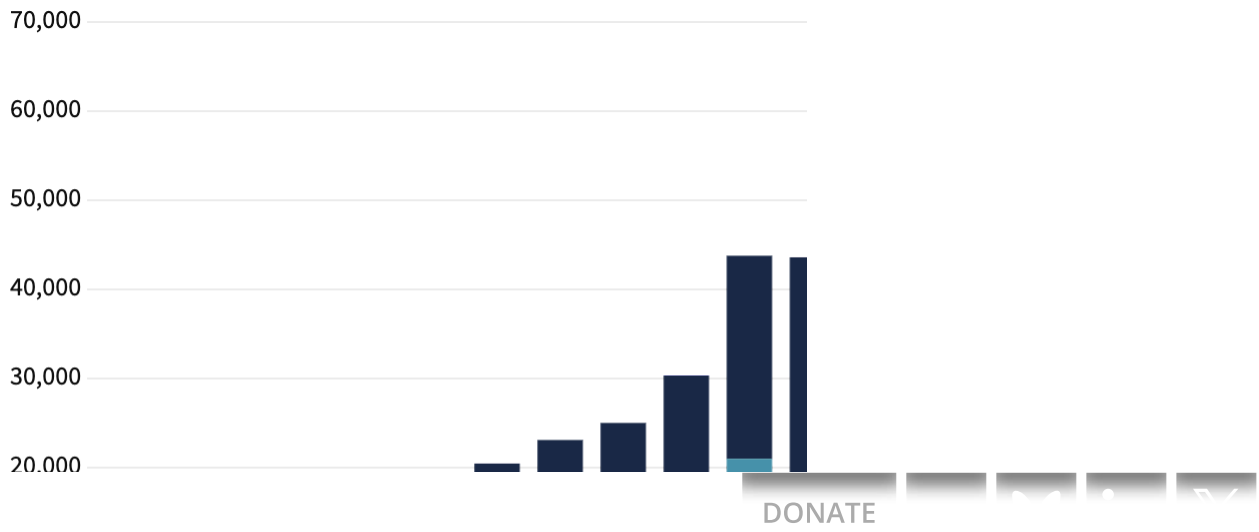
Health and care visa grants, a subset within the Skilled Worker category, fell most sharply, even before the care route was fully closed in July 2025. That likely reflected changes in the Home Office to scrutinise sponsorship applications in the care sector more carefully and step up enforcement against employers who break the law. The NHS also greatly reduced its recruitment of overseas nurses over the past two years, for reasons unrelated to visa policy.

Official data show that work visa grants have fallen sharply since Labour took office. However, it is difficult to say how much of this decline has resulted from its new policies, as opposed to the continuation of a downward trend that began under the previous government. It also remains difficult to assess whether domestic skills initiatives are having an impact.

Figure 2

Skilled worker visa grants fell by 79% during Labour's first two years in office

Skilled worker visa grants to main applicants, by quarter and type (**Other**, **Health & Care**)



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2026).

Another way for overseas workers to move into the UK labour market is through the Graduate Visa, which currently allows international students to work in the country for two or three years after graduation. This became more significant as the number of international students rose sharply and more of them chose to stay after their studies. The government has said it will retain the Graduate route, though the length of the visa will be reduced from 24 to 18 months for non-PhD graduates starting in 2027.

The government has also said it will reduce the exploitation of migrants on work visas, including by removing sponsor licenses from employers who violate employment law. There is evidence that the exploitation of migrants on work visas has been widespread, although it is inherently difficult to quantify its scale or track changes over time.

Pledge 3: Reducing small boat arrivals

Small boat arrivals have declined since Labour first took office in July 2024. Around 27,900 people arrived by small boats in the year ending 9 September 2026, the lowest level of yearly arrivals since December 2021. The figure was 11% lower than when Labour took office, with 31,500 arrivals in the year ending 5 July 2024. Arrivals increased significantly after the election, before entering a period of consistent decline since the autumn of 2025.

Numbers have fluctuated up and down in the last few years, and it is hard to determine what has driven these trends, including the recent fall in arrivals. As

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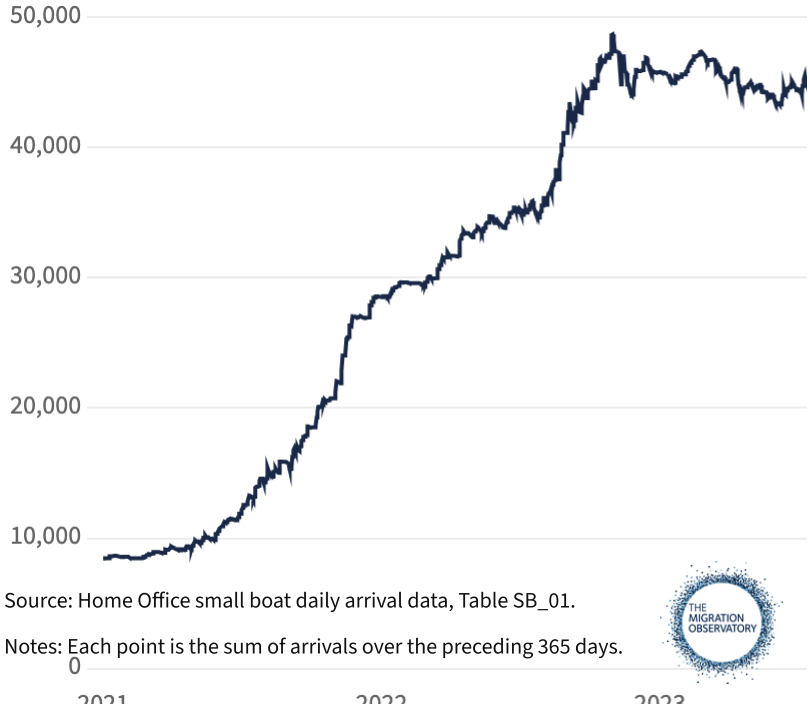
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details, see Q&A: Why have small boat arrivals declined in 2026?).

Figure 3

In September 2026, small boat arrivals reached the lowest level since 2021

Rolling 365-day total of small boat arrivals to the UK, 1 Jan 2021 to 14 Sep 2026



Source: Home Office small boat daily arrival data, Table SB_01.

Notes: Each point is the sum of arrivals over the preceding 365 days.

There is cross-party consensus that small boat arrivals should be reduced but there are major differences between their approaches. The previous Conservative government's flagship policy on small boats was the Rwanda scheme, which aimed to relocate people who arrived in the UK without authorisation to the East African country.

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belongings more easily. In April 2026, the government signed a new three-year enforcement deal with France, effectively extending a previous one reached by the Conservatives in 2023. Under the agreement, the UK will pay France £662m, an increase of 39% compared to the previous three years, in exchange for increased patrols and staffing on the French coast. The government has also increased cooperation with international partners, stationing more officers on the European mainland and signing agreements with origin and transit countries like Iraq and Serbia.

In July 2025, the government signed a 'one-in, one-out' returns agreement with France. This allows the UK to return some people who arrive by small boat, in exchange for accepting an equal number of asylum seekers from France. Returns began in September 2025, and around 1,400 people had been returned to France by early September 2026, around 4% of all arrivals during this period. A similar number of people arrived in the UK under the scheme. As with Rwanda, the goal of this scheme is to deter people from crossing the Channel in the first place. A deterrent effect will likely depend on the number of people that are eventually returned – significant deterrence may require a large proportion of people arriving by small boat to be sent back to France.

The Home Secretary also announced significant reforms to the asylum system in November 2025, aiming to deter asylum seekers from coming to the UK. Starting in March 2026, recognised refugees have been given a temporary status that will have to be renewed every 30 months, and may wait up to 30 years before being granted settlement if they arrived in the country without authorisation, instead of the current, direct 5-year path to permanent settlement (for more details, see Temporary protection: the UK's new policies on asylum and returns).

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affect both asylum seekers, who face uncertainty and are not allowed to work, and the government, which has seen its spending on support and accommodation for asylum seekers rise sharply. Several factors explain the large backlogs, including more applications and a lack of tribunal capacity.

The initial decision backlog stood at around 32,000 applications at the end of June 2026. That was the lowest level since 2019, and 62% lower than when Labour took office.

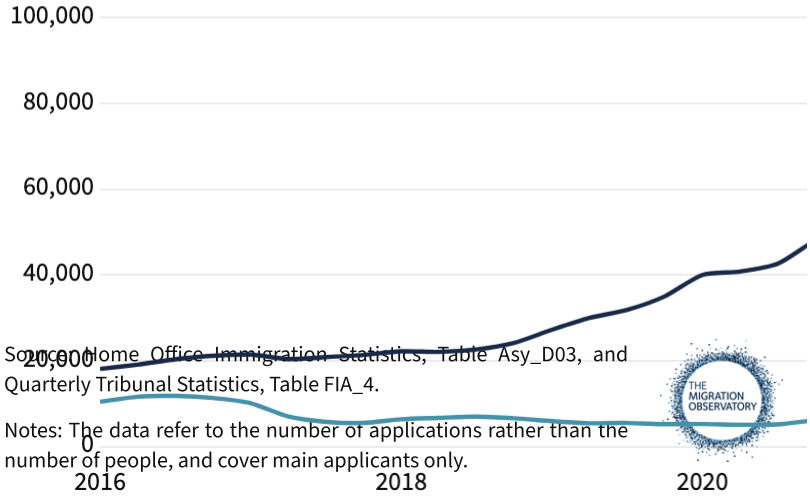
However, an additional appeals backlog has grown rapidly in the courts and overtaken the initial decision backlog. By the end of June 2026, around 90,000 asylum applications were waiting for a decision on their appeal, almost three times as much as when Labour took office. The number of refusals of asylum applications increased in recent years as a result of more initial decisions and a lower grant rate, driving the growth in appeals. The number of appeals decided has increased but has been constrained by a lack of court capacity. Sector organisations have also argued that a shortage of legal aid has led to cases taking longer to hear.

The government plans to accelerate appeals by setting up a new independent appeals body under the Home Office, with professional adjudicators replacing the existing immigration judges. It introduced a new Bill before Parliament to implement these changes in June 2026. The government also aims to streamline procedures by accelerating cases deemed to have a low likelihood of success, and ensure all possible claims are dealt with in a single appeal.

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Source: Home Office Immigration Statistics, Table Asy_D03, and Quarterly Tribunal Statistics, Table FIA_4.

Notes: The data refer to the number of applications rather than the number of people, and cover main applicants only.

The government has not offered a timeframe for its goal of clearing the asylum backlog, nor a definition of what it means to have cleared it. There will always be at least some pending decisions, because of new applications entering the system.

Pledge 5: Ending the use of asylum hotels

Largely as a result of growing backlogs, the number of asylum seekers receiving support from the government has increased sharply in recent years. Asylum seekers are not allowed to work and are entitled to accommodation provided by the Home Office if they are destitute. Housing is normally provided in dispersed accommodation – units secured on the private housing market around the UK through several contract providers. However, the large increase in the supported population and housing shortages in the UK have meant that the government did not have

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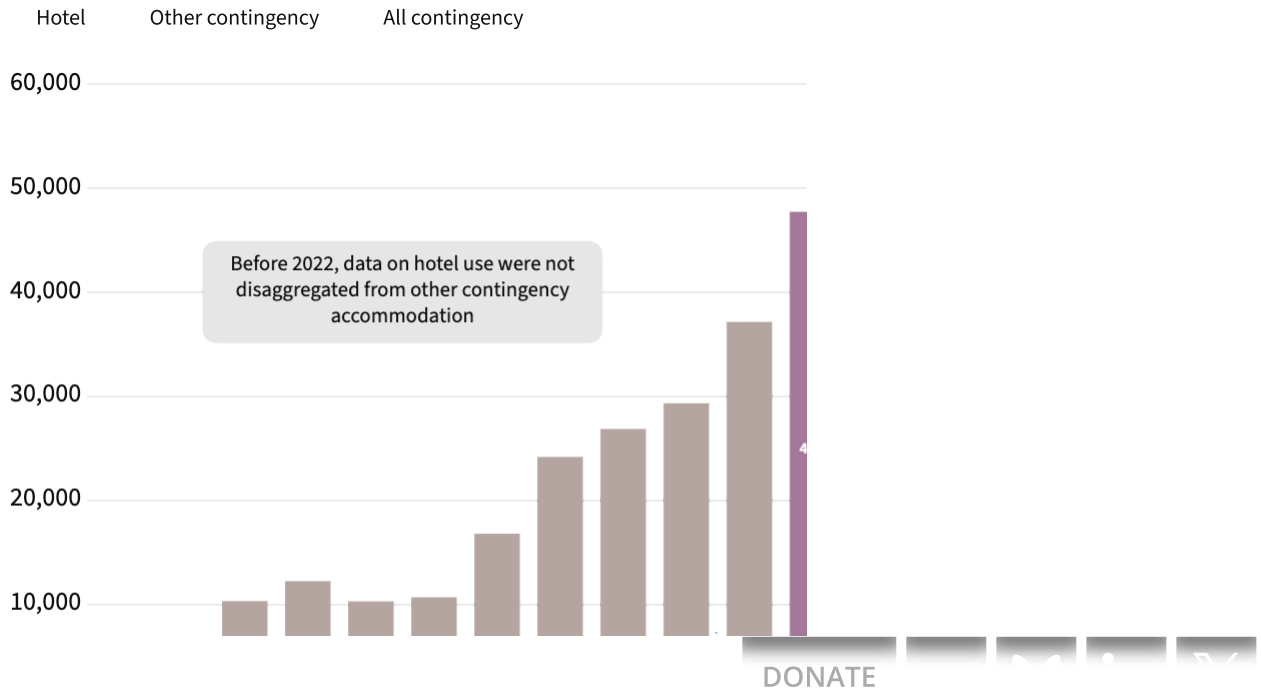
against their use. The UK spend £4.36bn on its asylum system in 2025/26, down from £4.76bn in 2024/25 and £5.38bn in 2023/24. The government announced plans to house more asylum seekers in military barracks in October 2025, and the first of these new sites opened in January 2026 with a capacity of up to 500 people. Asylum seekers were already housed on two former military sites under a policy started by the previous government, though the NAO had previously raised concerns about the high cost of such schemes, at least in the short run.

At the end of June 2026, around 16,000 asylum seekers were living in hotels. That was about 46% less than when Labour took office. In total, around 93,000 people were receiving some form of asylum support from the Home Office.

Figure 5

The number of asylum seekers in hotels fell 48% in the first half of 2026

Number of asylum seekers in contingency accommodation at the end of the quarter, by type



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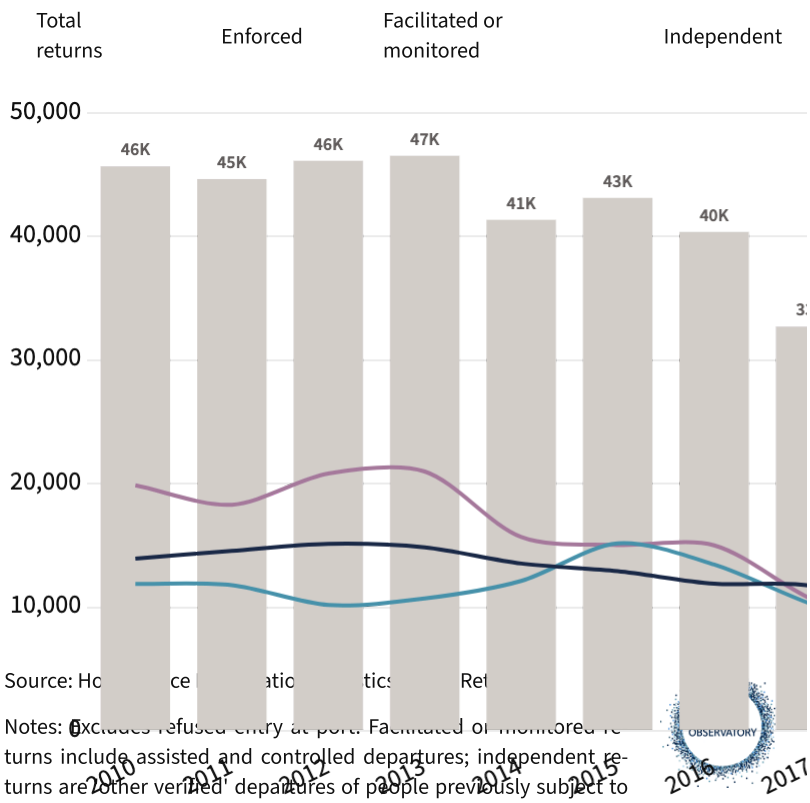
Pledge 6: Increasing returns

Labour has pledged to remove more people who have no legal status in the UK. Total returns fell sharply during the 2010s, though increases since 2020 have mostly reversed this decline. Around 41,000 people were returned from the UK in the year ending 30 June 2026. That was 8% more than a year before, and 30% more than when Labour took office. The increase took returns to the highest level since 2015, but still slightly below the level of the early 2010s.

Figure 6

There were 40,600 returns in the year ending 30 June 2026, the highest level since 2015

Number of returns, by year and type



Source: Ho ce atio tics Ret

Notes: 6 Excludes refused entry at port. Facilitated or monitored returns include assisted and controlled departures; independent returns are 'other verified' departures of people previously subject to immigration action.

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not know what share of people without legal status are removed, go on to receive legal residence rights, or remain in the UK without status.

It is not clear exactly why returns declined in the 2010s before partly recovering since. Several factors are likely to have played a role, including increased legal challenges, lower budgets for enforcement, and fewer people being refused visas in-country. Similarly, the increase in returns is likely to have been at least in part driven by higher resources and increased immigration in recent years, both legal and unauthorised (for more details, see Returns of unauthorised migrants from the UK).

While returns have increased since Labour took office, it is difficult to know how much of this increase results from their activities in office and how much is just a continuation of the existing trend we saw under the previous government. Labour has redeployed staff to a returns unit, maintained Conservative plans to increase detention spaces, and promised to set up support programmes in several countries of origin to support the reintegration of returnees. Like the previous government, it has negotiated new return deals. An agreement with Iraq was signed in August 2025, following a deal with France in July 2025 to return some people who arrived by small boat.

At the end of 2025, new agreements on returns were reached with Namibia, Angola, and the DRC after the Home Secretary threatened visa sanctions against three countries deemed uncooperative on the return of their nationals from the UK. Powers to impose such sanctions were introduced by the previous government in 2022, though had never been used before. The impacts of these measures is yet to be seen, but so far they cover a small percentage of refused asylum seekers and other unauthorised migrants.

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£10,000 per person, and up to £40,000 per family – was launched in March 2026 aimed at families living in asylum hotels, along with a public consultation on how families with children could be forcibly removed in the future. The government also says it will prioritise removals by limiting human rights and modern slavery claims, though details remain unclear.

The number of returns alone does not tell us everything about how effective government policy is at removing people with no legal status. For example, some types of returns are more cost-effective than others. Voluntary returns are cheaper and are often considered more humane than enforced removals.

Returns do not result only from government policy. UK voluntary returns statistics include people who leave with no contact with the authorities (e.g. a person who overstays their visa by a couple of months and then leaves the country of their own accord would be counted as a return). These independent returns made up 39% of all returns between 2018 and 2025.

Thanks to David Goodhart for comments on an earlier draft. All errors remain our own.

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