Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants

UK country profile

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Key messages

• Most Britons consistently overestimate the number of migrants in the UK. In 2018, refugees and other migrants accounted for 14% of the current UK population, yet the majority of Britons assume that 27% of the UK population are migrants.

• The UK is among the European Union (EU) countries with the most positive attitudes towards immigration, but Britons hold the most negative attitudes towards refugee assistance. While most Britons favour a reduction in immigration, since the EU referendum in 2016 immigration has ranked as a less important issue for the public.

• Public narratives on refugees and other migrants are polarised between a ‘threat narrative’ to culture, wealth and security, and a ‘positive narrative’ emphasising the potential benefits of immigration to culture, the economy and society.

• The UK will change its immigration policies after it leaves the EU, with the end of free movement and existing EU citizens living in the UK required to apply for settled status.

• Businesses could do more to engage with immigration and highlight the shared benefits of labour mobility for host communities and migrants alike. Migrants have a positive effect on both businesses and the wider economy, with a 1% increase in the migrant share of the population creating a 2% increase in income per head.
This briefing presents an overview of the key features of migration and asylum policy in the UK, recent trends in migration patterns, public perceptions and political narratives on refugees and other migrants. This is part of a wider project supported by the IKEA Foundation aimed at supporting public and private investors interested in engaging with migration and displacement.

**History of immigration in the UK**

The UK has long been a country of immigration, providing refuge and opportunities for refugees and other migrants from all over the world (see Figure 1). In the immediate period after the Second World War, the need for regeneration opened the UK up to those displaced by the war, and to immigration from overseas British territories. This liberalisation continued until legislation restricted immigration from the Commonwealth in 1962.

For much of the twentieth century, the numbers migrating to and from the UK were roughly in balance, but from the 1960s to the early 1990s the number of emigrants was often greater than the number of immigrants (Figure 2). This pattern reversed in the mid-1990s, and for almost the last 20 years the UK has seen positive net immigration. As in other countries, patterns of migration are affected by specific events (such as EU enlargement in 2004) and trends in economic growth.

In 2018, refugees and other migrants made up an estimated 14% of the UK’s population (Migration Observatory, 2019). In the same year, refugees made up around 0.26% of the UK population, with 126,720 refugees, 45,244 pending asylum cases and 125 stateless people in the country (UNHCR, 2019b).

From 1970 onwards there has been a consistent majority opinion for reducing immigration among the British public. Since the turn of the millennium, concern about migrants and refugees has been a dominant feature of British politics (Dempster and Hargrave, 2017). With successive governments failing to meet targets on immigration, the topic of migration has long loomed large, and was a key issue in the Brexit debate and the 2016 referendum.

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**Figure 1** Timeline of immigration to the UK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>HMT Empire Windrush docks at Tilbury</td>
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<td>1951</td>
<td>UK signs the Refugee Convention</td>
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<td>1962</td>
<td>Commonwealth Immigration Act</td>
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<td>1971</td>
<td>Immigration Act restricts immigration from Commonwealth countries</td>
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<td>1972</td>
<td>Ugandans seek refuge in UK after Idi Amin expels 80,000 African-Asians from Uganda</td>
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<td>1973</td>
<td>UK joins EEC and free movement for workers</td>
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<td>1989</td>
<td>Wave of immigration after fall of the Berlin Wall</td>
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<td>2004</td>
<td>8 new EU members increase migration to UK</td>
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<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Migrant crossings to Europe increase</td>
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<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>UK votes to leave EU</td>
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<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Windrush scandal</td>
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<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>UK relaxes rules on foreign students</td>
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Current UK immigration system and approach

Current UK policy for immigration and asylum distinguishes between EU and non-EU migrants and asylum-seekers, outlined in Box 1. All non-EU migrants must have a visa if they wish to stay in the UK longer than a few months. Visas are subject to a points-based system based on having a job offer with an appropriate salary, speaking English and having sufficient funds to cover maintenance. In the early 2000s, the government’s policy towards integration for new migrants shifted from a multicultural approach to a model where migrants have the responsibility to integrate, with the introduction of language examinations and the ‘Life in the United Kingdom’ test in 2005 (Sagger and Somerville, 2012).

At the time of writing, the impacts of the UK’s departure from the EU for migration and asylum policy and residence rights were unclear. In principle, leaving the EU will free the UK from its obligations under EU law, enabling the country to pursue an independent migration and asylum policy. The introduction of the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination Bill in the Queen’s Speech in October 2019 affirmed the government’s previous statements indicating the end of free movement in the UK (UK Cabinet Office, 2019). The government intends to introduce a new points-based immigration system which will prioritise particular ‘talented and hardworking’ migrants required by the British economy (UK Home Office Media, 2019). What this will mean in practice remains to be seen, but it is clear that substantial changes to the asylum and immigration system will be required if the UK government is to successfully attract the migrant workers it needs to fill specific skills gaps in key sectors, including hospitality and healthcare.

Immigration policies also have an impact in different sectors and policy areas. Increasing access and facilitating the contribution of migrants to basic services such as health and education may require specific policy interventions and reforms, especially in light of significant changes in immigration patterns. As detailed in Box 2, the healthcare sector in the UK is highly reliant on migrant workers, with significant consequences once the UK leaves the EU.
Box 1 Overview of UK immigration and asylum policies

**UK citizenship policy.** To become a citizen of the UK, generally a person must have lived in the country for at least five years (or three years if their spouse is British), have been granted the status of ‘indefinite leave to remain’ for the previous 12 months, meet the English language requirements and pass the ‘Life in the United Kingdom’ test (British Government, n.d.).

**UK asylum policy.** Individuals seeking asylum in the UK must apply upon arrival, meet with an immigration officer and undergo an asylum interview with a caseworker. Asylum-seekers are typically not eligible for employment or benefits while awaiting a decision on their application, but can apply for housing and a small weekly cash allowance (£37.75 per person). Decisions on asylum applications are usually made within six months but can take longer if documents need to be verified or further interviews are required, leaving many reliant on charity for survival. If granted refugee status, they become eligible to work in the UK and apply for social benefits (Right to Remain, n.d.).

**EU migrants.** Successive governments have sought to reassure the 3.2 million EU migrants in the UK that their rights will be protected after Brexit until a new system is in place in January 2021. Under current commitments EU citizens resident in the UK by 31 October 2019 have until 31 December 2020 to register and apply for settled status under the EU settlement scheme (UK Home Office Media, 2019). The scheme has been subject to criticism, with even a 5% failure rate in registration leaving over 150,000 resident migrants without leave to remain in the UK (Katwala, 2019). As of 15 October 2019, the House of Commons Library estimated 53% of EU nationals in Britain had applied for status under the scheme (House of Commons Library, 2019a).

Box 2 In focus – UK healthcare and the NHS

The healthcare sector is one of the largest in the country, employing around 6% of the total UK workforce (ONS, 2019). Public healthcare in the UK is heavily reliant on migrant workers – 13% of NHS staff say their nationality is not British (ibid.). As a result, the healthcare sector is acutely vulnerable to the potential effects of Brexit, with the exacerbation of staffing shortages a major concern. Key trends include:

- **Reliance on EU migrants:** Up until the 2016 referendum, the proportion of EU migrants in the healthcare sector was rising year on year – for example, from 2013–2017 the number of NHS nurses and midwives from European Economic Area (EEA) countries more than doubled (Department of Health, 2017). Today, one in five qualified GPs have gained their qualifications outside of the UK (ONS, 2019). Yet since the referendum this trend has reversed, with a sharp drop in applications from EU migrants across all healthcare roles.

- **Widespread staffing shortages, with the need for nurses the most pressing:** The current NHS staffing shortfall of 100,000 could reach a quarter of a million by the end of next decade (Nuffield Trust, 2019). Nurses are the biggest shortage; with 18% of nurses being non-British nationals (Baird and Mckenna, 2019), Brexit is already exacerbating this shortfall. In 2015–16, 19% of nurses who joined the NHS were from the EU. By 2017–18, this had fallen to 7.9% (House of Commons Library, 2019b). A combination of international recruitment, student grants and innovation is needed to reverse this trend.

- **The staffing risks posed by Brexit are most stark in the south of the UK:** Hospitals in London top the tables for EU migrants as a percentage of the NHS workforce. Royal Brompton and Harefield Trust, which runs two specialist heart and lung hospitals in the capital, has the highest proportion of both doctors and nurses and relies on the EU for nearly a third of all its frontline staff – 28% of its doctors and 27% of its nurses are EU nationals (Jones, Minto and Stockton, 2018). Outside of London, three out of the five trusts most dependent on EU nurses and health workers are in the east of England (Stockton, B., Minto, R. and Jones, A., 2018).
Public attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: what do we know?

Opinion polling on attitudes towards refugees and other migrants in the UK dates from as early as 1937 (Ipsos MORI, 2000). As Figure 3 shows, public opposition to immigration and actual levels of net migration do not always correlate.

A major innovation in the use of polling data was introduced in 2011, when More in Common separated the UK population into ‘tribes’ linked by their attitude to migration rather than their demographic composition (see Box 3). These models are used widely to help target outreach and communications work to more receptive and ‘malleable’ segments of the UK population. While the UK is among EU countries with the most positive attitudes towards immigration, Britons also are the most negative towards refugee assistance (Ipsos MORI 2018a; Tent Foundation, 2016). Polling also suggests that people feel that those who have come to the UK legally, abide by the rules, and contribute while they are in the country, should be allowed to stay. In a survey after the EU referendum, the majority of those polled (84%), including a majority who voted to leave the EU (77%), strongly supported the protection of EU migrants’ rights after Brexit (Ford and Sobolewska, 2018). Following the Windrush scandal, 1 a majority polled (64%) favoured an immigration system that protected those who have a legal right to be in the UK over one that prioritises deporting illegal immigrants (Ipsos MORI, 2018b).

Many people overestimate the number of immigrants in the UK and underestimate their economic contribution: respondents in a 2018 poll believed that 27% of the population is foreign-born, when the actual number is closer to 13.5% (Ipsos MORI, 2018b). European migrants living in the UK contribute £2,300 more to the public purse each year than the average adult, with the average European migrant arriving in the UK in 2016 contributing

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1 The Windrush scandal refers to immigrants to the UK wrongly detained, denied legal rights and, in several dozen cases, wrongly deported by the British government. Many had arrived in Britain from the Caribbean – ‘Windrush’ refers to the Empire Windrush, the ship that brought one of the first cohorts of Caribbean migrants to the UK in 1948.
£78,000 more than they take out in public services and benefits over their time spent in the UK (Oxford Economics, 2018). These figures mirror the fact that fewer people now believe that immigrants take jobs and welfare services away from Britons (Ipsos MORI, 2019).

### Box 3 Segments or ‘tribes’ of UK population by attitude to refugees and other migrants (2017)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Segment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Immigrant ambivalents</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>People who are generally less financially secure and optimistic about the future, and who judge immigration by the economic and social impact on their communities. They are more likely to be working class, of working age and to live in social housing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream liberals</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>Similar to the Confident multiculturals, but less enthusiastic; people who are comfortable with diversity and see immigration as both economically and culturally beneficial to the UK.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confident multiculturals</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>People who see immigration and diversity as largely positive, both economically and culturally. They are comfortable and confident about the future, well-educated, city-dwelling and opposed to Brexit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culturally concerned</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>People who are generally more economically secure than Immigrant ambivalents, but who are concerned by the changes immigration has brought. They are generally older, likely to identify as Conservative and to have voted to leave the EU. They believe immigration is economically beneficial, but that it also creates tensions between different ethnic groups, and see Muslims as distinctly different from the rest of the population.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latent hostiles</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>People who see immigration as having undermined British culture, public services and their own opportunities. They view the future pessimistically and are likely to identify with nationalist politics. They are likely to be less educated and working class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active enmity</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>People who see immigration as only negative; who are likely to be unskilled, unemployed and disengaged from political processes; opposed to other ethnicities and religions and prepared to act violently for what they believe to be ‘right’ (Carter, 2018).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to this segmentation, around one-fifth of Britons hold negative views towards refugees and other migrants (i.e. the Active enmity and Latent hostile). Nearly twice as many are actively comfortable with immigration, seeing it as an economic benefit (i.e. Confident multiculturals and Mainstream liberals). When combined with the 40% of the population in the ‘anxious middle’ (i.e. the Immigrant ambivalent and the Culturally concerned), this indicates an overall outlook that is not negative towards refugees and other migrants. This analysis indicates that there is space to engage with public attitudes as long as the messages are tailored to different ‘tribes’, taking into account the experiences of British-born residents.
Two popular narratives

Current discourse around migration is highly polarised, with perceptions split between narratives of perceived threat, positive narratives and an anxious middle that could be convinced by either narrative depending on the context (Dempster and Hargrave, 2017).

- In the ‘threat’ narrative, immigration is seen as threatening British values, culture and living standards, public services and security through rising extremism and criminality. These themes are considerably more heightened in discussions of non-white and more culturally distinct individuals (Dempster and Hargrave, 2017).

- ‘Positive’ narratives initially centred on celebrating diversity, in line with UK integration policies that promoted positive race relations and multiculturalism. More recently, the narrative has shifted to celebrating commonalities, seen in campaigns such as Citizens UK’s Refugees Welcome and More in Common’s Great Get Together (Crawley and McMahon, 2016). This new focus relies on ‘contact theory’, based on Gallup polls that indicate that acceptance of migrants increases with social interaction (Espiova et al., 2017). Another ‘positive’ strategy is to amplify migrant and refugee voices in the media through human interest stories in the hope of engaging the ‘anxious middle’ (Dempster and Hargrave, 2017).

The ‘positive’ narrative has helped shift the attitudes of some people: 21% of Britons surveyed by Ipsos MORI earlier this year say they have become more positive towards immigration. Half of those say that this is down to the positive narratives on immigration, which made them more aware of how much immigrants contribute to the UK, both economically and culturally (see Figure 4; Ipsos MORI, 2019). However, it is less clear that these messages have affected people who feel threatened by immigration and have concerns that do not necessarily relate to the economy.

Since the EU referendum, immigration has ranked as a less important issue for the public and attitudes have become more positive. Analysis by Ipsos MORI published in April 2019 shows that concerns about immigration had fallen to their lowest level in two decades (Ipsos MORI, 2019). A quarter of Britons are now more positive about immigration due to the belief that fewer refugees and other migrants will come to the UK after Brexit.

Figure 4  Graph showing general attitudes towards migration are more positive than negative

‘On a scale of 0 to 10, has migration had a positive or negative impact on Britain?’ (0 is ‘very negative’, 10 is ‘very positive’)
The shift in attitudes after the referendum suggests that people are likely to be influenced by electoral campaigning and messaging devised to harness the high political salience of migration, rather than public attitudes being grounded in personal beliefs and entrenched views. This calls for new and different ways to engage the public, starting with what matters to them, steering the focus and attention away from migration as a standalone issue.

**Implications for public and private investors**

The UK economy and businesses stand to profit from the skills and innovation offered by refugees and other migrants, with a 2015 report by the UK government noting that migrant employees ‘not only stimulate growth for British business by introducing new ideas and innovations but bring their unique overseas networks and cultural knowledge to drive expansion for their company abroad’ (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015).

There is substantial evidence that migrants have a positive effect on both businesses and the wider economy, with a 1% increase in the migrant share of the population creating a 2% increase in income per head (Legrain, 2018). Research has shown that companies in the US that support refugees increase their own brand awareness and attract consumer support, particularly among millennial consumers, women and people of colour (Erdem et al., 2018). Companies also stand to benefit from refugee recruitment, as refugees have a lower turnover rate than other employees (Dyssegaard Kallick and Roldan, 2018). Given the positive effects of immigration on productivity and shared economic benefits, businesses and investors could do more to help foster social cohesion, expand employment opportunities for refugees and other migrants and combat the dominant narrative that they take jobs away from British citizens.

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**Box 4  Examples of good business practice**

- **The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development** (CIPD) notes the importance of comprehensive induction and orientation programmes to aid the development of migrant workers in UK companies (CIPD, 2019). These approaches help ensure that companies maximise the potential of migrant workers for their own and the companies’ development and help integration.

- In 2016, the **Institute of Directors** released a report demonstrating the success stories of migrant entrepreneurs to the UK (Institute of Directors, 2016). The report drew on personal stories to challenge the belief that migrants cost the UK economically by showcasing migrants’ economic creativity as entrepreneurs. The project also suggested key policy recommendations to government to help migrant entrepreneurs contribute more to the UK economy.

- **The fashion brand Jigsaw** ran a ‘love immigration campaign’ in answer to the idea that immigration threatens ‘British values’, stating that ‘British Style is not 100 per cent British. In fact, there’s no such thing as 100 per cent British’. The campaign emphasised that without immigration, Jigsaw wouldn’t be Jigsaw. From the Afghan coat that Jigsaw first produced to the 45 nationalities it employs across the business, immigration and cultural diversity have helped Jigsaw define ‘British style’ on the high street.

- In 2017 **Starbucks** pledged to hire 10,000 refugees worldwide, with 500 jobs for refugees in the UK (Refugee Council, 2019). The Refugee Council uses its networks of refugees and refugee-supporting organisations to help advertise job opportunities and the company’s training programme for refugees ensures that they gain wider skills.

- **Transitions London** matches refugees with appropriate business opportunities for six-month internships that can transition into a permanent job (Transitions London, 2019). These internships, which help refugees build the necessary experience to find a permanent position, can be particularly significant as some refugees find it difficult to provide evidence of past employment.
Based on this analysis there is scope for companies and investors to engage more and better to support refugees and other migrants in ways that are beneficial for their businesses as well as for local communities. Box 4 provides some examples of good practice in businesses engaging with the integration of refugees and other migrants in the UK.

Businesses and investors looking to change public attitudes towards migrants and refugees should seek partnerships which best reach those segments of the UK population open and susceptible to positive influence on the topic. Key considerations should include:

1. The use of ‘trusted’ messengers. While politicians and the media are less likely to be trusted influencers, research has shown that ‘regular’ people, such as local media personalities, civil society organisations and those who have welcomed refugees and other migrants into their communities, are the most trusted and effective messengers (Dempster and Hargrave, 2017).

2. Messages which demonstrate commonality and integration and dispel perceptions of the ‘threat’ narrative through emotive and personal means rather than facts and statistics. Most importantly, highlighting collective benefits for all is key, with an emphasis on the communities that feel most threatened by immigration.

3. Innovative partnerships are needed between organisations in the migration and refugee sector, businesses and other local groups to share expertise and harness the resources and skills of business to achieve shared goals.

About the project

Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: implications for action is a two-year project led by ODI’s Human Mobility Initiative, funded by the IKEA Foundation. It aims to provide detailed and practical recommendations to help businesses and investors influence attitudes to migrants and refugees, with a focus on the UK and Germany and more in-depth studies of attitudes in the global South. Briefing papers will feed into broader events and roundtable discussions where practice, partnerships and policy can be developed and shared among businesses and sector experts.
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