# Net migration to UK halves amid Labour’s cautious shift to stricter policies



The recent announcement of a significant drop in net migration to the UK has provided Prime Minister Keir Starmer with a momentary reprieve in the midst of ongoing immigration policy debates. Recent figures show a striking decline, with net migration plummeting from 860,000 in 2023 to about 431,000 in 2024. However, this shift is largely a product of the strict immigration measures implemented by the Conservative government rather than any new policies from Labour. Critics argue it’s premature for Starmer to take credit for a decline that reflects decisions made before he even took office.

The reasons behind this decline are complex. A 49% decrease in work-related immigration from non-EU countries played a significant role, along with a 17% drop in international student arrivals. Additionally, more individuals who initially came to the UK on temporary study visas have opted to leave. While the new Labour government aims to tighten immigration even further—closing certain visa routes and raising eligibility criteria—the reality is that this drop is predominantly an automatic result of previous Conservative policies, which were enacted to address mounting public discontent with immigration levels.

Given the rising political pressure from parties advocating for stiffer immigration controls, there is a clear shift in Labour’s stance towards a stricter immigration policy. This includes promises of increased education and salary thresholds for skilled workers, harsher regulations for care worker visas, and a concerted effort to reduce net migration year-on-year until 2029. This reflects a broader recognition of the growing appeal of right-wing populism and the pervasive anti-immigration sentiment shaping public discourse and party politics.

However, this maneuvering is fraught with risks. By attempting to capture the narratives of more stringent immigration policies, Labour may alienate its left-leaning supporters who have historically embraced inclusive immigration practices. The delicate balance Starmer must maintain could have serious electoral implications, particularly if voters perceive a drift towards the right.

The new administration must also confront the considerable surge in asylum claims, which exceeded 109,000 in 2024—a 17% rise from the previous year. While Labour may publicize lower net migration figures, the ongoing challenges posed by asylum seekers and the stress on public services persist. Critics warn that an overemphasis on reducing net migration could lead to an underinvestment in welfare and public services, jeopardizing overall economic stability.

As Labour prepares to assume full responsibility for migration policy, the party will encounter heightened scrutiny from both the opposition and the electorate. The ascendancy of parties advocating for rigorous immigration reforms underlines a shifting political landscape where the desire for tougher controls must be weighed against commitments to social equity and the sustainability of public services. Starmer's administration finds itself in a vulnerable position—able to bask in the accolades of governance, yet equally exposed to the consequences of policy missteps as it navigates the intricate and contentious immigration domain.

The ramifications of these shifting policies extend beyond mere statistics; they possess the potential to reshape British society and politics. As Labour strives to reinterpret its position in this evolving landscape, Starmer must remain vigilant in upholding the principles of inclusivity that have long characterized the party while recognizing the vital socio-economic benefits that migration has historically provided to the United Kingdom.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2059233/keir-starmer-take-credit> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/c8b3fcc3-b0af-450d-8ee9-178de69751ba> - In 2024, net migration to the UK fell sharply to 431,000 from 860,000 in 2023, driven by stricter immigration rules introduced in late 2023 by the Conservative government. The decline resulted from a 49% drop in work-related immigration from non-EU countries, a 17% fall in international student arrivals, and increased emigration among post-pandemic student cohorts. The measures, including restrictions on dependants for care workers and students and higher salary thresholds for skilled workers, reduced long-term immigration to 948,000. Long-term emigration rose 11% to 517,000, the highest since 2017. Prime Minister Keir Starmer’s Labour government announced further reforms aiming to reduce immigration, such as closing the care visa route and toughening settlement pathways. Home Office data also reported a 39% drop in work visa applications for the year to March 2025. Despite the political appeal, experts warned that lower net migration may harm public finances, potentially increasing the budget deficit by £7bn annually. Additionally, asylum applications surged to 109,000, a 17% increase, with notable rises from Pakistani nationals. Less than half of asylum claims were approved, further complicating the government’s stance on immigration.
3. <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uk-net-migration-falls-sharply-2024-ons-2025-05-22/> - In 2024, long-term net migration to the UK significantly declined, nearly halving from 860,000 in 2023 to 431,000, as reported by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). This substantial drop was primarily attributed to fewer arrivals on work and study visas due to recent visa rule changes. The decrease offers political respite to Prime Minister Keir Starmer, who had committed to lowering migration levels, facing pressure from the anti-immigration Reform UK party. The reduction was largely driven by a fall in immigration from non-EU+ countries, which include nations outside the EU as well as Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Switzerland. The ONS noted increased emigration, especially among individuals who had initially come to the UK on study visas, likely prompted by the relaxation of pandemic-related travel restrictions. The highest recorded net migration was 906,000 in the year ending June 2023.
4. <https://apnews.com/article/14d91a9f74648887cbf4c621ad9973eb> - In 2024, net migration to the UK dropped by nearly 50%, falling to an estimated 431,000 from 860,000 the previous year, according to the Office for National Statistics. The main driver was a sharp decline in work and study visas, introduced by the Conservative government in early 2024, marking the largest numerical and percentage fall since 2020. The decrease reflects both lower immigration—dropping below 1 million for the first time in three years—and a return of emigration to 2017 levels. Previously, immigration surged due to UK visa programs for Ukrainians and Hong Kong residents. Although the Conservatives aimed to address rising migration, they were ousted after record highs contributed to discontent. The new Labour government, under Prime Minister Keir Starmer, faces ongoing tension exemplified by anti-immigration riots. Starmer has announced new measures to further cut net migration, including stricter visa criteria and higher English language requirements, aiming for significant reductions ahead of the next general election. Migration remains a heated political issue, especially with the rise of anti-immigration parties like Reform U.K. and public concerns over pressure on public services and social cohesion.
5. <https://elpais.com/internacional/2025-05-12/keir-starmer-endurece-las-reglas-de-entrada-de-inmigrantes-en-respuesta-al-auge-de-la-derecha-populista.html> - El primer ministro británico, Keir Starmer, ha anunciado un endurecimiento significativo de las normas de inmigración en respuesta al auge de la derecha populista liderada por Nigel Farage, que obtuvo buenos resultados en las recientes elecciones locales. Las nuevas medidas incluyen duplicar de cinco a diez años el tiempo requerido para obtener la residencia permanente, elevar el nivel educativo y salario mínimo exigido a los trabajadores extranjeros cualificados, restringir visados en el sector de la atención social y controlar con mayor rigor los visados estudiantiles. Starmer defiende estas políticas como necesarias para reducir la inmigración neta y aliviar la presión sobre servicios públicos y vivienda. A pesar de adoptar ideas previamente impulsadas por gobiernos conservadores, el líder laborista plantea la reforma como una estrategia de justicia y control necesario. Así mismo, el gobierno no fijará cifras concretas de reducción migratoria, pero se compromete a disminuir el número año tras año hasta 2029. Además, se contemplan excepciones al endurecimiento para inmigrantes altamente cualificados y contribuyentes ejemplares. Las nuevas propuestas buscan atraer talentos seleccionados, reforzar el mercado laboral nacional y limitar el uso de visados como vía alternativa de migración.
6. <https://www.ft.com/content/c6bb168f-4869-4a15-99a8-23048488705b> - UK Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer has confirmed that his government is in discussions with various countries, primarily in the Western Balkans, about establishing "returns hubs" for individuals whose asylum applications have been rejected in the UK. These hubs would serve as temporary processing centers before deportation to the individuals' countries of origin. The initiative is part of Starmer’s broader strategy to reduce immigration, alongside measures like new bilateral agreements and increased arrests. During a visit to Albania, Starmer emphasized the need for effective migrant returns, although Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama clarified that Albania would not participate in the scheme. The model differs from the Conservative Party's Rwanda plan, as it only involves those who have exhausted legal avenues in the UK. Despite rising small boat crossings in 2025, the Home Office has deported 24,000 migrants in a nine-month span—the highest since 2017. Starmer acknowledged the scheme is not a definitive solution but a component of a comprehensive strategy to manage illegal migration. The UK plans to continue detailed assessments to ensure the program is legally compliant and cost-effective.
7. <https://apnews.com/article/c2d38b5c9a4be09ad383871318808f12> - El gobierno del Reino Unido impondrá sanciones a miembros de bandas de contrabando de personas que envían migrantes a través del Canal de la Mancha en embarcaciones precarias, buscando detener estos peligrosos viajes. El primer ministro Keir Starmer afirmó que las prohibiciones de viaje y el congelamiento de activos se centrarán en "anillos financieros ilícitos que permiten a los contrabandistas traficar con personas vulnerables". Las sanciones, que requieren la aprobación del Parlamento, entrarán en vigor dentro de un año. A pesar de esto, la eficacia de las medidas es incierta, ya que las autoridades británicas sólo pueden congelar activos dentro del Reino Unido y muchos contrabandistas están basados en otros lugares. La secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores, David Lammy, indicó que el Reino Unido será el primer país en desarrollar legislación específica para sancionar la inmigración irregular y el crimen organizado. En 2024, más de 38,000 personas cruzaron el Canal, un aumento del 25% respecto al año anterior, aunque menos que en 2022. Más de 70 personas fallecieron en 2024 durante los intentos de cruce.