

Immigration: A changing debate

*Analysis of new findings from the Ipsos
MORI immigration attitudes tracker
survey*

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Executive Summary

The Ipsos MORI immigration attitudes tracker offers one of the most authoritative and rigorous sources on what the public thinks about immigration, conducted in 12 waves to date across the last seven years. This latest wave of the tracker was a nationally representative survey of 4,000 adults across Great Britain aged 18+, conducted online between 18 June and 10 July 2021. It examines public attitudes across a range of issues, with some questions having been asked in each wave of research since 2015 to enable comparison.

Immigration attitudes have softened significantly over the last seven years, with public sentiment becoming more positive after the 2016 EU referendum and sustaining at that level ever since. The public is now more likely to see the contribution of immigration as positive (46%) than negative (28%) overall, in a reversal of the pattern when this tracker series began in 2015. There is an opportunity for more light and less heat in the immigration debate, though different political challenges remain for both sides of the political spectrum. Anyone seeking to affect change will need to engage with the politics and attitudes of immigration as they are now in 2021, in this new context, and this tracker report offers useful insight.

A changing debate

The latest Ipsos MORI Issues Index, which measures the issues of greatest concern to the UK public, found that immigration had slid to eighth position as of August 2021. Only 12% of people now regard it as a key issue of concern, but salience has been falling steadily over the last four years. Around four in ten people (42%), however, still feel that we don't talk about immigration enough. A quarter (25%) feel that it's discussed the right amount, and 17% say we talk about it too much.

Since the immigration attitudes tracker began in 2015, it has asked respondents to give a 0-10 score to indicate whether they feel immigration has had a positive or negative impact on Britain. The scores in this latest wave continue a trend of positive sentiment, with 47% giving a positive score of 6-10, compared to the 28% who give a negative score of 0-4. The survey taken at the time of the May 2015 general election, by comparison, found only 35% were positive and 42% were negative.

Respondents to each wave of the survey have also been asked if they would prefer immigration to the UK to be increased, decreased or to remain the same. Reflecting these gradually warming attitudes, this latest survey found the lowest ever support for reducing immigration and the highest ever support for immigration to be increased. While 45% would still prefer reductions in immigration, some 29% would prefer it to stay at the current levels and 17% would like it to increase.

Public satisfaction with the current Government's performance on immigration remains very low, with only 1 in 8 (12%) saying they are satisfied with how the Government is dealing with immigration – the same proportion as in November 2020 (and a similar level of satisfaction to that of the two previous governments). More than half the public (55%) say they are dissatisfied.

The immigration debate over the last few parliaments was focused on numbers, with repeated failures to meet the government's net migration target. With that target now dropped there is an opportunity to move the debate on. Our survey asked whether people would prefer an immigration system that prioritises control, regardless of whether numbers go up or down; or whether they would prefer an approach that focuses on reducing immigration numbers. It found that people were almost twice as likely to prioritise control (44%) over reducing numbers (24%).

Survey respondents were also asked about the EU Settled Status scheme, which was put in place allow European citizens, who arrived before December 31st 2020, to continue to live and work in the UK post-Brexit. The deadline for applications for Settled Status lapsed at the end of July this year. Almost half (48%) of respondents say that eligible EU citizens should be allowed to make a late application, while just under a third (32%) would not support late applications being accepted.

Migration for work

The Immigration tracker looks at public attitudes in the new context, post-Brexit and with Britain's economy emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic. It finds that 46% of the public would support a temporary relaxation in immigration restrictions to help British businesses if they need an additional supply of skills and labour to assist with economic recovery. Around a quarter of people (23%) would oppose such a move.

There is public permission for employers to recruit from overseas, where needed, across a range of sectors, including key workers, seasonal workers and low-skilled jobs that are hard to fill. Two thirds of people (65%) say employers should be able to recruit from overseas 'for any job where there are shortages in the UK'. This is at odds with the more restrictive regulations currently in place and suggests that there is political space for relaxations where needed on economic grounds.

Hong Kong

Around two-thirds (68%) of the public support the new government programme to give at least some Hong Kong citizens with the status of British National (Overseas) the right to come and live in the UK. Only 12% of people would oppose the decision. The consensus in favour crosses demographic and political boundaries.

The most popular reason was that this is morally the right thing to do – with six out of ten supporters of the decision citing this as the reason.

The public is fairly evenly divided on whether they would take all eligible applicants from Hong Kong (35%), or whether there should be a cap on the number of people who can use this route, supported by 33%.

There are positive early signs that the government has considered how to get right the settlement and integration of new arrivals from Hong Kong, with a £43 million dedicated support package, including support for local government and regional migration hubs. The Home Office and MHCLG have the opportunity to work proactively with economic and civic society stakeholders, building on the positive examples of the EU Settlement Scheme and Syrian resettlement programme.

Asylum seekers and refugees

The declining salience of immigration contrasts with the relatively high profile of refugees and asylum as an issue, due to extensive media coverage of people arriving across the Channel in small boats. Most people (53%) say they have some sympathy with people attempting to come to Britain by boat. Some 20% say they don't have much sympathy and 20% say they have no sympathy at all. These findings are broadly similar to those of August 2019. Women and men think differently, with six in ten women (61%) expressing sympathy, compared to a minority of men (45%).

The tracker research was conducted prior to the US and UK withdrawal from Afghanistan and responses will not reflect shifts in attitudes prompted by the Afghan refugee crisis. The next wave of research will enable us to note any attitudinal changes against this baseline.

Slightly more people (43%) would prefer an asylum system that is fair, even if that means numbers who settle in the UK are higher, than the 36% who would prefer an asylum system that prioritises deterring people from coming to the UK.

The Nationality and Borders Bill proposes sweeping reforms to the UK's system of refugee protection. In particular it proposes to treat asylum applicants differently according to how they arrived in the country, with those who make their own way to the UK no longer entitled to full refugee protection. People are uncertain and divided over the proposed changes and how the UK approaches asylum policy. The most favoured option – supported by 36% and opposed by 27% – is to keep the current system, in which some people get refugee status through UN resettlement schemes while those who make their own way to the UK have their asylum claim assessed when they arrive in the UK.

About a third (32%) would support the proposed changes under the new Bill, with asylum seekers who make their own way to

the UK only allowed to stay for a limited time, while those who arrive through a UN resettlement scheme are allowed to stay permanently. Around the same number of people (30%) oppose this idea, while 26% remain on the fence, neither supportive nor opposed.

Some 28% of respondents would prefer the UK to stop protecting refugees entirely and close the border to refugees, with a hardcore 14% saying they fully support this idea. Only 31% support increasing the number of refugees the UK takes in via UN resettlement schemes, while 36% are opposed (though as noted above, this finding pre-dates the Afghanistan withdrawal and setting-up of a resettlement programme for Afghan refugees).

There is more consensus on how people are treated once they are in the UK. At present, people seeking asylum in the UK are not allowed to work while they wait for their asylum claim to be decided and must rely on state support, unless it takes more than a year to get a decision. Most people (58%) agree that asylum seekers might have useful skills and experience and should be allowed to work. Two-thirds (66%) say that it would reduce their need for state support and 58% feel it would help asylum seekers to learn English and integrate. However 54% believe that giving asylum seekers the right to work could attract people without a genuine asylum claim to the UK.

The findings suggest that the debate is still up for grabs: advocates for a more welcoming approach to refugee protection can take heart from the lack of clear support for the measures outlined in the new Bill. They also face the challenge that there is no majority in opposition to the Bill, either.

The crisis in Afghanistan, and a refugee crisis that looks likely to result from it, could prompt a change in public opinion. Indeed, other unfolding events are also likely to shift opinion on a number of immigration issues, for example on migration for work if the economy continues to grow at pace and needs more skills and labour as we emerge from the pandemic. The Immigration attitudes tracker provides a valuable picture of changes over time: anyone working to change policy in this area, whether from a political, business, or civil society perspective, will need to pay heed to the changing shape of public attitudes if they wish to have impact.

Introduction

The last five years has been a period of significant change, both to patterns of immigration and government policy on the issue. Public attitudes on the issue have shifted too, as we set out in detail in this report. Yet at times it can feel that our public and political debate about immigration has failed to keep pace with these changes.

The Ipsos MORI immigration tracker offers one of the most authoritative and rigorous sources on what the public thinks about immigration, having been conducted in 12 waves across the last seven years. These summer 2021 findings are the first of four waves of the tracker over the next two years, to ensure that the story of changing attitudes remains up to date.

Around half of the public are balancers, seeing both the pressures and the gains from immigration¹, but the overall balance of perspectives has shifted significantly in a more pro-migration direction, with a significant drop in the salience of immigration and a gradual long-term warming of attitudes.

Immigration attitudes have softened significantly over the last seven years – with the public more likely to see the contribution of immigration as positive (46%) than negative (28%) overall, in a reversal of the pattern when this tracker series began in 2015. The 2021 survey also brings news of fairly stable attitudes in volatile times: the long-term reduction of salience and gradual warming of attitudes over the last five years has not been dramatically affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in either direction. However, there continues to be low trust in government on immigration – a perspective shared by those with liberal, restrictionist and balancer views, perhaps for different reasons.

As a result of changing attitudes, the immigration policy debate is no longer primarily about numbers – it is about the choices that Britain makes, and what we do to make them work.

The most striking new 2021 finding is that the appetite for overall reductions in immigration numbers is now at an all-time low. 45% of respondents would like overall numbers to be reduced, down from 49% in November 2020, and from 67% in February 2015. Some 46% would now prefer numbers to either remain the same (29%) or to increase (17%). Asked to prioritise, control (44%) is chosen over reducing numbers (24%) by a two to one margin, with another fifth of respondents choosing neither of these as a priority.

This is not just a record low across the seven years of this Ipsos MORI tracker survey, but also contrasts with the prevailing pattern of attitudes over the decades. The British Social Attitudes survey showed a stable preference for overall reductions in numbers from two-thirds of the public – with relatively little variation when net migration was negative

(across the 1970s) or much higher, since the 1990s. So the post-2016 drop is dramatic in this historical context.

That 45% of people would like to reduce migration shows that numbers will continue to be one part of the debate, though many within this group are selective reducers, who take different views of different immigration questions. That explains why there are much broader public majorities for some specific choices that would increase migration, such as the two-thirds support for the government's offer of a new visa route for people from Hong Kong.

There are different responses to different types of immigration. There is a more polarised public argument about asylum and refugee issues than about economic migration. But here too there is a shift in the shape of the debate, with a much more even balance between the opposing camps. There is, by a small margin, public sympathy rather than no sympathy for those crossing the Channel in small boats – though nobody on any side of the debate would see the images of dangerous crossings as exemplifying a well-managed migration or asylum system. The findings suggest that a debate about 'control' versus 'compassion' will produce a deadlocked stand-off, with a quarter to a third of the public on each side of a polarised argument.

The crisis in Afghanistan arose after the fieldwork for this wave of research was conducted. But other published attitudes research finds a public majority for the new resettlement scheme for Afghan refugees. While there is a public minority – approaching three in ten – opposed to Afghan resettlement², this group lacks a parliamentary voice. After all, those who oppose a resettlement scheme for Afghanistan would be unable to claim that they were motivated by a concern to protect "genuine refugees". So the Commons debate did not see this principle contested, but was rather about the scale of Britain's commitment.

The new – or old – politics of immigration?

If there is an opportunity for more light and less heat in the immigration debate, the political challenges remain for both sides of the political spectrum. Most people are balancers on immigration, though the two major parties will tend to strike those balances differently, reflecting their distinct electoral coalitions.

Having ended free movement, Boris Johnson's Conservative government has tended to make liberal choices on student and post-study visas, and on non-EU migration for work. The new research demonstrates that it continues to have the political and public space to expand some immigration routes, within the bounds of its points-based system. Potential support is not confined to highly skilled migration: it is also a feature of public attitudes towards shortages of skills and labour across different levels of the labour market. If there are labour shortages – whether of construction workers, truck drivers or fruit-pickers – a government that proposes to blend migration and domestic training would be able to secure pragmatic permission from the public.

While the post-Brexit debate has primarily been about who gets a visa to work in Britain, the next phase of debate will need to have more to say about what happens now. The government has taken more proactive initial steps on Hong Kong than on any previous wave of migration – and should expand the principle to a more positive approach to citizenship and integration more broadly.

But this government has been more wedded to the old politics of asylum, seeing performative toughness on asylum issues as a political strategy to try to get through a summer of rising numbers of Channel crossings to the Kent coast. When trust in government on migration remains so low, increasing the media and political salience of asylum without having a workable response is likely to fail. It would repeat the mistake of over-promising and under-delivering on immigration, which characterised the era of the net migration target. Such an approach will be too harsh for the growing liberal section of the public, yet the reforms proposed may also be dismissed as empty rhetoric by the quarter of opinion with the toughest views. The key to securing the balancer majority on refugee issues is not to increase the heat and temperature of the debate, but to focus on control, compassion and competence – by investing in an effective, fair and humane asylum system at home, and seeking the multilateral deals with France over Channel crossings, alongside an international response to the Afghanistan crisis.

The opposition parties are unlikely to reach – or to need – voters with the toughest views on immigration. Labour’s political challenge is to unite pro-migration liberals with left-leaning balancers, who see the pressures and gains of immigration. The left’s debate about this can perhaps underestimate the extent to which swing voters in the ‘Red Wall’ tend to be closer to the centre of the spectrum of attitudes – both more cautious than the graduate Labour vote, but softer than other Conservative or Brexit Party Leave voters.³ A more proactive approach to integration and citizenship can strengthen confidence across this broad coalition. So the opposition parties should find a voice that talks about fairness to migrants and to the communities that they join, encouraging and promoting citizenship, and investing in strengthening social contact across these different groups.

A similar challenge applies to civic society critics of this government. They, too, will need to engage both liberals and balancers to unlock broad public support for a managed system of asylum that is effective, fair and humane. This could help to broaden support for Britain increasing its contribution to Afghan resettlement, and to defend the principle of giving all asylum seekers a fair hearing for their case, however they arrive in the UK.

How far these long-term shifts in immigration attitudes are now reflected in a new political and policy agenda will depend on how the public debate is led. But politicians will need to steer a course that runs with the current of public opinion now, in 2021 – not that of a decade before.

Methodology

This report presents new findings from the immigration tracker conducted by Ipsos MORI for British Future. This nationally representative survey of 4,000 adults across Great Britain aged 18+, conducted online between 18 June and 10 July 2021, is the latest of 12 waves of research into public attitudes to immigration since February/March 2015. It will continue to track shifts in attitudes, at approximately six-monthly intervals, over the next two years.

As a panel survey, the immigration tracker enables changes in attitudes to be identified over time as political, economic and social contexts change. Some 1,500 participants had taken part in the previous two waves of the survey, while 2,500 were a fresh sample. Data have been weighted by age, gender, region, social grade and educational attainment to match the profile of the population.

The UK's emergence from the pandemic is an opportune moment at which to consider the future role of migration in economic and social recovery. Our report uses the latest data from the tracker to explain changing opinions in the context of the two major events of Brexit and Covid-19. It examines public attitudes to key migration-related issues, including satisfaction with policy, the new immigration system for work, the EU settlement scheme, the Hong Kong settlement programme and policy in relation to refugees and asylum-seekers. We also asked participants about broader questions of principle, such as whether their preference is to focus on immigration numbers or on control.

The crisis in Afghanistan had not happened at the time of the survey, therefore the report does not cover public attitudes towards asylum for those affected. This will be included in the next wave of the survey.

British Future analysed responses to these questions, looking at differences by characteristics such as age, gender, social class and region as well as political allegiances. Where questions were asked in earlier waves of the tracker, we have looked for movement over time.

We have also examined how responses to policy questions vary by people's broad perspectives on immigration. Our previous work has found that, while some people are very opposed to immigration and others are very much in favour, most people typically hold a mix of views. We asked people to give a 0-10 score to indicate whether they feel immigration has had a positive or negative impact on Britain, and used these scores to segment people into three groups: 'migration sceptics', 'migration liberals' and the 'balancers' who sit somewhere in between. Around half of respondents to the immigration tracker survey were balancers, giving a score of 4-7 (48%); with roughly a quarter scoring in the upper reaches of 8-10 (23%) and lower levels of 0-3 (22%). These classifications are used to shed light on responses to some more detailed areas of policy

and differ slightly from the categories used by Ipsos MORI when conducting their trend analysis.⁴ Both scales are used within the analysis of the report.

The Immigration Attitudes Tracker project is funded by Unbound Philanthropy and the Barrow Cadbury Trust.

Section I: Britain's changing immigration debate

The salience of immigration as a political issue has varied over time. At the time of the referendum in June 2016, Ipsos MORI's Issues Index identified it as the public's top concern: almost half of the public said that immigration was one of the most important issues facing Britain.⁵

The latest index from August 2021 found that immigration had slid to eighth position, with only 12% of people regarding it as a key issue of concern. Not surprisingly, the Covid-19 pandemic is the public's top concern at 40%.⁶ This period, dominated by the pandemic, could be seen as a blip. Some might argue that immigration concerns were assuaged by the fall in net migration seen during the period of the pandemic, though it seems unlikely that there would be high public awareness of this impact.⁷

In fact, the Index finds that levels of concern about immigration dropped some time ago. In January 2017 almost a third of people (31%) saw immigration as one of the most important issues for the country; a year later only one in five (20%) felt this way. This fell further, so that just before the pandemic began to dominate public concern, only 16% saw immigration as one of the main issues for the country.

The salience of immigration could rise again in the future, depending on events. It could equally remain low or even decline further – we have no way of knowing. What we do know, however – and what this latest wave of tracker research reinforces – is that public attitudes to immigration have gradually become more positive over the past five years. So if immigration does return as an issue of high public salience in the future, it will be to a much warmer environment than when it was last a key issue for voters.

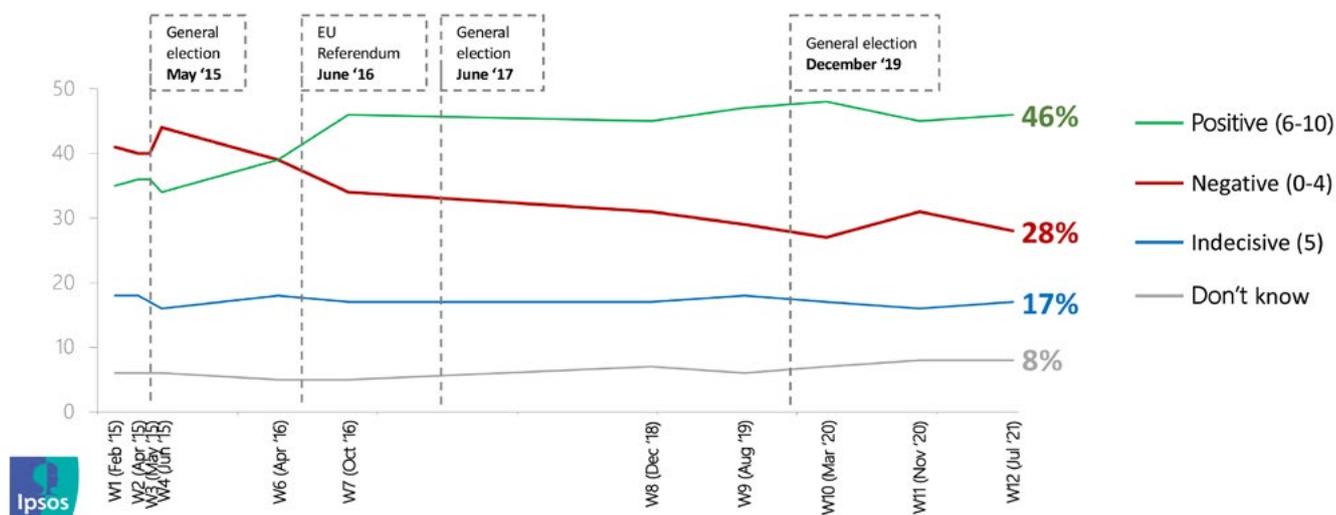
What did we find?

The impact of immigration is more often seen as positive than negative

Since the Immigration Attitudes Tracker began in 2015, it has asked respondents to give a 0-10 score to indicate whether they feel immigration has had a positive or negative impact on Britain. The scores in this latest wave remain positive, with 46% giving a positive score of 6-10, compared to the 28% who give a negative score of 0-4. November 2020 saw broadly similar responses, with 45% seeing the impact as positive and 31% as negative. Looking back at earlier waves we can see a positive shift in attitudes: the survey at the time of the May 2015 general election found only 36% were positive and 40% were negative about the impact of immigration.

Fig 1.1: Britons remain positive about the impact of immigration

Q 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”)



Base: All respondents (W1: 4574; W2: 3770; W3: 3023; W4: 2698; W6: 4002; W7: 4071; W8: 2520; W9: 2006; W10: 2100; W11: 2532; W12: 4000); Fieldwork dates: 18 June to 10 July 2021

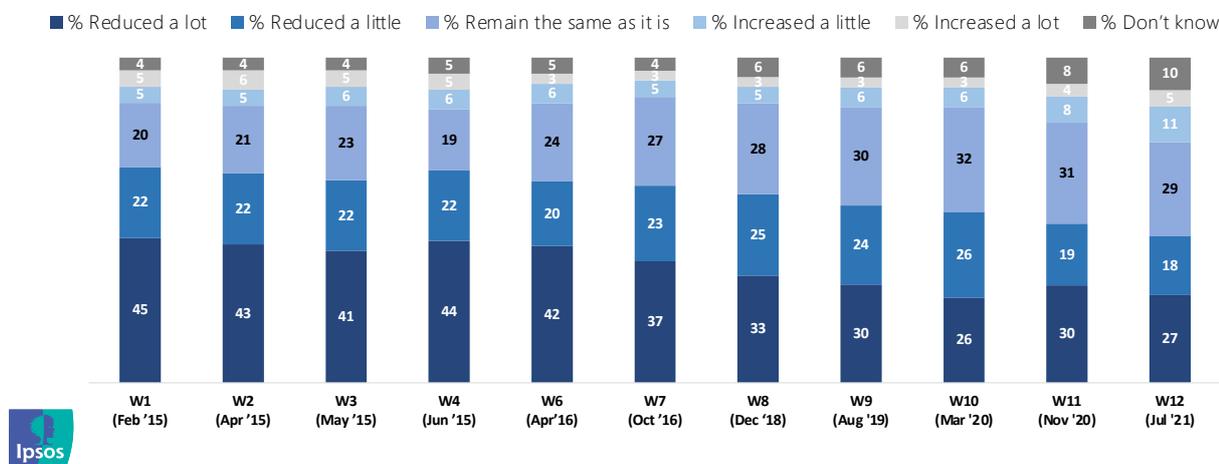
In the most recent wave of research, Conservative voters are equally likely to see the impact of immigration as positive or negative (both 38%) while Labour supporters are more uniformly positive than negative (61% vs 17%). Those who identify as Remainers are more positive than Leavers, though Leave supporters have become more positive towards immigration over time, with 31% now seeing its impact as positive.

Support for increased migration rises, while support for decrease is lowest ever

A more marked positive trend is apparent in responses to the question of whether immigration should be reduced, increased or kept at the same level: 45% now say it should be reduced but 1 in 6 respondents (17%) say it should be increased. The remaining 29% say it should remain the same. The proportion supporting an increase in migration is the highest the tracker has ever recorded, up from 9% in August 2019 and 12% in November 2020. Meanwhile the proportion supporting a reduction is the lowest recorded by the tracker, having decreased 4 points since 2020 (49%), 9 points since 2019 (54%) and 22 points since the first wave in February 2015 (67%).

Fig I.2: Continuing overall trend of fewer people wanting to see immigration reduced

Q Do you think the number of immigrants coming to Britain nowadays should be increased a lot, increased a little, remain the same as it is, reduced a little, or reduced a lot?



Base: All respondents (W1: 4574; W2: 3770; W3: 3023; W4: 2698; W6: 4002; W7: 4071; W8: 2520; W9: 2006; W10: 2100; W11: 2532; W12: 4000); Fieldwork dates: 18 June to 10 July 2021

The question of future immigration numbers was one of the issues on which respondents feel quite differently according to political allegiance. Labour supporters show a fairly even distribution between support for increasing immigration (27%) or reducing it (26%), with 37% preferring to keep it at its current level. The preference of Conservative supporters is clearer, with two-thirds (67%) supporting reductions and only 9% wanting to see immigration increased.

People also think differently on this question according to their age and location in the UK. Young people aged 18-24 are most supportive of increased immigration (28%) and least supportive of a decrease (23%). Those aged over 65 have similar views to Conservative voters, with 60% favouring a reduction. Londoners are more in favour of increased migration than those living in other areas of Britain.

Views on whether we talk too much or too little about immigration haven't changed

In the years leading up to the EU referendum, public figures often stated that immigration was discussed too little. While others felt that we talked of little else, it reflected concern that immigration is a sensitive topic, and that some people worried that their concerns may have been seen as racist.⁸ The months before and after the referendum saw a surge in political, media and public debate about immigration. However, the tracker has found that a sizeable proportion of people feel that immigration isn't discussed enough: just over four in ten (42%) have this view, while a quarter feel that it is discussed the right amount, and only 17% too much.

Views on this question are strongly correlated by attitudes and by age. Those who feel we talk too much about immigration are more likely to be migration liberals (29%). It is largely migration sceptics who feel we aren't discussing immigration enough, with 70% feeling this way. More than half (53%) of people aged 65 and over say we talk about immigration too little, compared to only 30% of those aged 18-24. This may partly reflect the greater ease with which young people talk about issues such as race and immigration, as well as more liberal attitudes in this age group generally. At the same time, responses to the question may reflect higher levels of concern among older people, and a view that immigration should be discussed more than it is.

Responses to this question are very close to those of November 2020. However, the proportion of people who feel that immigration is talked about 'too little' appears to have increased since the pandemic, up 12 points from 30% in March 2020. This most likely reflects shifts in media coverage as the Covid-19 pandemic took hold.

Do the Government's policies on immigration have public support?

The Government's main activity in the months leading up to the survey centred on five areas:

- The Nationality and Borders Bill, which was passing through parliament at the time of the survey.
- Its handling of substantial numbers of asylum seekers and refugees in small boats.
- The passing of the deadline for EU citizens to apply for Settled Status.
- The granting of residency visas to Hong Kong citizens with British Overseas National (BNO) status.
- Changes in work visas, including changes to the Shortage Occupation List and the introduction of a new graduate route, open for applications from 1 July 2021.

As mentioned earlier, the crisis in Afghanistan had not happened at the time of the survey, so the Government's handling of the issue will not have affected opinion.

Awareness of these issues is likely to vary. Using media coverage as an indicator, the public is most likely to be aware of policy and practice in relation to asylum seekers and refugees. On the issue of work visas, we can assume relatively high levels of awareness that free movement has ended and a new system is in place, but little awareness of the details of the new system and recent adaptations. In these circumstances, responses are likely to be based quite strongly on underlying attitudes.

What did we find?

Most people are still dissatisfied with the Government's performance on immigration

How does the public rate the current Government's performance on immigration policy? Currently, only 1 in 8 (12%) say they are satisfied with how the Government is dealing with immigration – the same proportion as in November 2020. The proportion saying they are dissatisfied is also more or less the same, at 55%.

Migration sceptics and liberals are much more likely to be dissatisfied with the Government's performance on immigration than balancers, with 77% of sceptics and 60% of liberals expressing dissatisfaction, compared to 45% of balancers. While Conservative voters are more likely than others to say they are satisfied than other groups, nearly half of Conservatives (47%) say they are fairly or very dissatisfied, compared to a more predictable 60% of Labour voters.

Looking further back, there has been a marked shift in satisfaction ratings since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. The overall proportion of the public that feel dissatisfied with government performance on immigration has increased by 14 points from 41% in March 2020, returning to similar levels of dissatisfaction as those recorded in previous waves of the tracker research. This largely represents a shift in attitudes among Conservative voters: 42% of respondents who voted Conservative were happy with the government's handling of immigration in March 2020, yet this has halved to 21% in this survey. At the same time, levels of dissatisfaction among Conservatives have more than doubled from 22% to 47%.

Control is more important than numbers

Debates on immigration have focused on the twin issues of control and numbers. Under free movement, the Government had limited control over who could come to live and work in the UK from other EU member states. However, from 2010 the Conservative Party was committed to a migration target in which it aimed to reduce net migration to the tens of thousands – a level exceeded since the 1990s.⁹ The target was never met and was finally dropped by Prime Minister Boris Johnson after his election in December 2019.¹⁰

During the referendum campaign, the pro-leave slogan 'take back control' was ever-present, sometimes combined with the aim of reducing immigration numbers. Clearly, both aims can co-exist, but studies, particularly those using qualitative methods, have tended to suggest that the public is more concerned about control than numbers.¹¹

We asked survey respondents:

‘When thinking about the government’s immigration policy, which of the following two statements is most important to you?’

- The UK government having control over who can and can’t come into the country, whether or not that means immigration numbers are significantly reduced.
- Having an immigration system that deters people from coming to the UK so that numbers remain low.

The most popular option is for the Government to have control over who can or can’t come into the country, regardless of whether this significantly reduces numbers, with 44% preferring this option. A quarter of people (24%) say they prefer a system that deters people from coming to the UK so that numbers remain low. Some 22% say they support neither of these options. Some 22% say they support neither of these options.

Fig. I.3: Does the public prioritise control or reducing numbers?

“When thinking about the government’s immigration policy, which of the following statements is most important to you?”



- The UK government having control over who can and can’t come into the country, whether or not that means immigration numbers are significantly reduced
- Having an immigration system that deters people from coming to the UK so that numbers remain low
- Neither of the above
- Don’t know

Base: all respondents (4,000); Fieldwork dates 18 June to 10 July 2021.

Most people in the ‘balancer’ middle in terms of immigration attitudes favour a system based on control (53%) rather than numbers (20%); while migration sceptics are more evenly divided, expressing a slight preference for reducing numbers (48%) over control (40%). Almost half of liberals (47%) favour neither option. People in older age groups are also more likely to support a system focused on control, rather than one that emphasises reducing numbers.

Late applicants to the EU Settlement Scheme

The total number of European citizens who have come to live and work in the UK since the start of free movement in 1992 to its end in December 2020 is thought to be in the region of 6 million, with an estimated 3.5 million currently living in the UK.¹²

To allow European citizens who arrived before December 31st 2020 to continue to live and work in the UK post-Brexit, with a route to staying permanently, the Government introduced the EU

Settlement Scheme (EUSS). The scheme opened for applications in March 2019 with the deadline to apply for ‘Settled Status’ set for the end of June 2021.

The Home Office has said it will accommodate people who have ‘reasonable grounds’ for a late application, but these are unlikely to cover all circumstances.¹³ Organisations representing EU citizens in the UK, for example the 3 Million, have expressed concern about lack of awareness among some EU migrants about the scheme and the consequences of not registering.¹⁴

Respondents were asked what should be done for people who are eligible but have missed the June deadline: whether they should be allowed to apply after the deadline passes or whether this should not be allowed, resulting in loss of their legal right to remain in the UK.

Around half of respondents (48%) say that eligible EU citizens should be allowed to make a late application. Around a third (32%) would not support late applications being accepted.

Responses differed significantly by political allegiance: two thirds of Labour supporters would allow late applications, but just over a third of Conservative supporters. Only a third (33%) of those who identify as Leavers would allow late applications, while 53% say late applications should not be accepted. Two-thirds of Remainers (67%) would allow late applications and only 16% would deny them.

How should policy makers respond to changes in public attitudes to immigration?

This new wave of the Immigration Attitudes Tracker finds a steady continuation of the trend since the 2016 EU referendum, across different measures, for more positive attitudes towards immigration. Wider evidence suggests a number of factors are at play though their relative influence is hard to prove.¹⁵ There are a number of possible explanations for this trend:

- Discussions during and after the EU referendum highlighted how much immigrants contribute to the UK.
- People feel they have been able to have their say on immigration.
- The end of free movement provides reassurance of UK government control over immigration and that new immigrants meet certain criteria.
- Media coverage of immigration has reduced and become less negative.

The salience of immigration relative to other policy concerns has also fallen, possibly for similar reasons and because Covid-19 has focused opinion on the government’s handling of the pandemic. Concerns about the economy have also increased, again most likely because of the impact of the pandemic. What seems unlikely is that

immigration has reduced in salience because there has been less of it during the pandemic: numerous studies have shown that public knowledge of numbers is limited, and this study finds that people are now more interested in control than numbers.

At the same time, levels of dissatisfaction with the Government's performance on immigration are high among immigration sceptics and liberals alike, including among the Government's own supporters. For those in power there is a risk that their policy could please no-one: too unwelcoming for migration liberals and soft balancers but not tough enough for migration sceptics.

As the pandemic recedes and ceases to dominate public opinion and debate, it is likely that immigration will start to assume more importance. A recent YouGov poll suggests this may already be happening,¹⁶ with respondents listing immigration third, after health and the economy, when asked which issues would determine their vote if a general election was held tomorrow. Such an election is some way off, however, and Ipsos MORI's most recent monthly issues index, which asks people to state the most important issues facing Britain today, has immigration in eighth place, below education, inequality and the environment.

Immigration is not going away as an issue and politicians ignore it – and the four-in-ten people who say we don't talk about it enough – at their peril. What these new findings do suggest, however, is that there is less need to be afraid of the issue. Attitudes are warmer than before and much of the heat has, for the moment, gone out of the debate.

The general shift in attitudes offers an opportunity for politicians to make the case for more liberal immigration policies, especially where there are clear public benefits. That could be in response to the crisis in Afghanistan or the shortages of workers in some sectors of the economy. The public desire for an approach that offers effectiveness and control remains, but within that frame there is scope for numbers to increase if politicians are willing to set out their argument. While Labour voters will be the most receptive, with more than a third of its supporters identified as migration liberals, the majority of supporters of both main parties are balancers. This creates political space for politicians to support relaxations should labour shortages emerge, an issue we explore in more depth in the following chapter.

Section 2: Migration for work

Free movement ended on 31st December and a new, skills-based immigration policy has been in place since the 1st of January, replacing the previous tier system. This latest tracker survey is the first since the new policy was put in place and is an opportune moment in which to look at public attitudes towards its principles, especially in relation to migration for work. This is not least because free movement was a central issue on which the referendum campaign was fought, especially by the Leave side with its message of ‘take back control’.

As we saw in the previous section, the public currently favours policies that emphasise control more than those focused on reducing numbers. But how does this translate into support for actual policy, and over who should be entitled to a work visa? Here we present the findings from the tracker’s questions on immigration for work, exploring what might happen to attitudes as Britain emerges from the pandemic and post-Brexit policies are put to the test.

New immigration policy – a summary

The new policy embodies two key principles covered by the Government’s policy statement of February 2020. They involve support for highly skilled migration and a rejection of lower skilled entry routes, encapsulated in the following excerpts from the Home Office’s 2020 policy statement:

- *We will replace free movement with the UK’s points-based system to cater for the most highly skilled workers, skilled workers, students and a range of other specialist work routes including routes for global leaders and innovators.*
- *We will not introduce a general low-skilled or temporary work route. We need to shift the focus of our economy away from a reliance on cheap labour from Europe and instead concentrate on investment in technology and automation. Employers will need to adjust.¹⁷*

While not explicitly intended to reduce overall levels of immigration, the policy affects a substantial proportion of people who might migrate to the UK, based on figures for recent years. Work is the principal motivation for between a third and half of people migrating to the UK, but it has been much higher for EU migrants. The number of people migrating to the UK for work has fallen substantially since the 2016 EU referendum – from 308,000 in 2016 to 219,000 in 2019.¹⁸

A range of work visas have been put in place in a single system covering EU and non-EU migration. The main route is the Skilled Worker visa, which replaces the previous system available to people from outside the EU. It is a points-based system, which requires potential migrants to accrue a minimum of 70 points to be eligible:

visas are attached to a specific job with a sponsoring employer and must be obtained before arrival in the UK.

Minimum salary levels are set at £25,600 (or the going rate if higher) but can be as low as £20,480 for jobs on the Shortage Occupation List or for applicants with a relevant PhD. Eligible jobs have to be at RF3, an intermediate skill level roughly equivalent to 'A' level. There is no maximum period of stay for this visa and holders can apply for indefinite leave to remain after five years.

Some existing work routes have been extended to include EU citizens. These include the Global Talent route, which requires sponsorship through a recognised UK body rather than an employer. They also include the Intra-company Transfer (ICT) route allowing temporary stays for key business employees.

Other work routes included in the new immigration system are for students and for specialist occupations including ministers of religion and sportspeople. The existing Youth Mobility Scheme has been extended: it involves arrangements with eight countries and territories for around 20,000 young people to come to the UK to work and travel each year. Applicants must be 18 to 30 years old and can stay up to two years. There is also a pilot seasonal agricultural workers scheme, currently offering 30,000 places for visas of six months.¹⁹ The Graduate Visa will be available to international students who have completed a degree in the UK from summer 2021.

What did the survey ask?

We asked respondents a range of questions on their attitudes towards policies in relation to migration for work. Specifically we looked for their views on the circumstances under which employers should be allowed to recruit from overseas and for which types of job. This includes whether the circumstances should be those where there are skills shortages or where immigration is needed for key services. We also looked at whether people think policy should be relaxed to assist post-Covid recovery.

We asked whether the Government should allow or not allow employers to be able to recruit from overseas in any of the following circumstances:

- Any job where there are shortages in the UK.
- Lower skilled jobs that are harder to fill by workers in the UK.
- Key services, such as health and social care.
- Temporary seasonal work, for example in fruit picking and hospitality.

It will be apparent from our earlier description that these are not circumstances that currently align with the principles of the new immigration policy. Instead they represent pressure points on the system that are reported by employers and representative bodies.²⁰

The combined effects of Brexit and the new immigration system are reported to be currently contributing to labour shortages in road haulage, leading to delays in supermarket deliveries – although Covid-19 and the ‘pingdemic’ was also a factor in July 2021.²¹ It is likely that other sectors will experience similar labour shortages as the UK emerges from the pandemic and the labour market returns to normal.

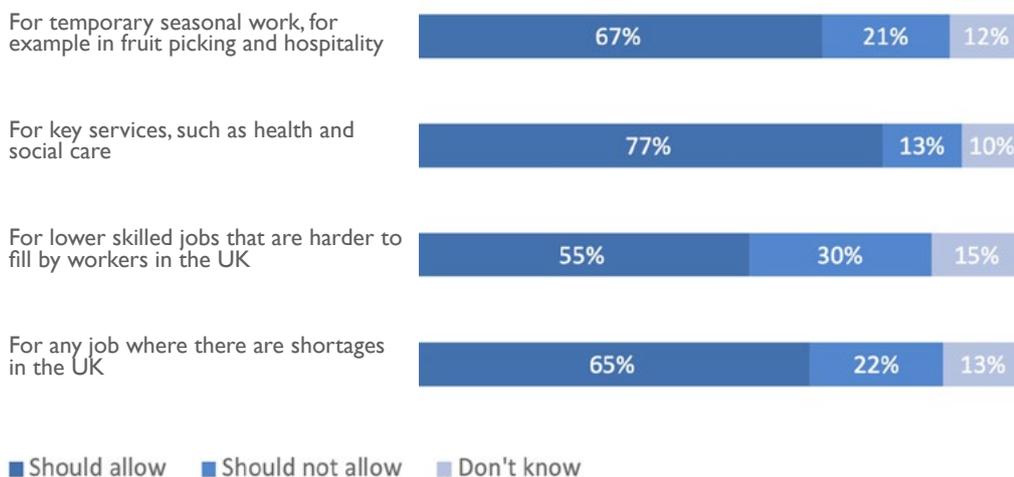
What did we find?

When it comes to employers being able to recruit from overseas, a majority of the public said they should be able to do so in each of the scenarios discussed. The strongest support was for overseas recruitment to be allowed for positions in key services, such as health and social care, supported by three-quarters of respondents (77%). Two thirds of people (67%) support migration for temporary seasonal work in sectors such as agriculture and hospitality. A majority of respondents (55%) also support recruitment from overseas for low skilled jobs that are harder to fill from within the UK.

Indeed, two thirds of the public (65%) agree that employers should be able to recruit from overseas for any job where there are shortages.

Fig 2.1: Migration for work: public support for overseas recruitment

“Current immigration policy allows employers to recruit people from overseas in some circumstances and not in others. For each of the following circumstances, please say whether the government should allow or should not allow employers to be able to recruit employees from overseas.”



Base: all respondents (4,000); Fieldwork dates 18 June to 10 July 2021.

Younger people are more likely to support these measures than older people. People living in Scotland and in London are more supportive of recruitment for jobs with shortages, including lower skilled work, and for temporary and seasonal work, than people living in other areas of Britain.

There is consistent support from people across all areas of Britain for recruitment to key services such as health and social care. It has particularly strong support from older people, with 86% of people aged 65+ in favour of this option. It is also supported by almost two-thirds of immigration sceptics (64%).

Older people are also more likely to support temporary seasonal recruitment, with more than three-quarters (78%) of people aged 65 and over in support. This may reflect greater familiarity with the practice, since there were fewer 'don't knows' in this group. While supported strongly by immigration balancers and liberals, half of sceptics are also in favour of temporary seasonal recruitment.

Public attitudes are at odds with restrictive policies

Our findings on questions of immigration policy measures are noteworthy in the extent of support for options to address ongoing and emerging labour shortages. But they are particularly significant considering that they include some situations in which employers are currently not permitted to recruit from overseas, and diverge from key principles of the Government's immigration policy. Table 2.2 shows these discrepancies as they relate to responses to the options offered to respondents.

Table 2.2: In what circumstances should employers be allowed to recruit from overseas?

Public support by job type	Current rules	Alignment/divergence between public attitudes and current policy
<p>Any job where there are shortages in the UK</p> <p>65% support</p>	<p>The points-based system (PBS) allows work visas for jobs which score sufficient points, based on salary threshold, skill level (RQF3 or intermediate) and English language requirements.</p> <p>Occupations in which there are shortages have a lower salary threshold, but there is no flexibility on skill level.</p>	<p>Divergent</p> <p>The PBS was designed to exclude jobs below intermediate skill level. The findings indicate support for criteria more focused on need than skills.</p>
<p>Lower skilled jobs that are harder to fill by workers in the UK</p> <p>55% support</p>	<p>Jobs below intermediate skill level (RQF3, roughly equivalent to 'A' level) are excluded from the points-based system.</p>	<p>Divergent</p> <p>As above – the findings indicate shortages should play a stronger role in the points based system.</p>
<p>Key services, such as health and social care</p> <p>77% support</p>	<p>Immigration policy was not designed to prioritise recruitment to key services. However, in 2020 the Government added eight occupations in the health and care sectors to the Shortage Occupation List, including pharmacists, physiotherapists, nursing auxiliaries and assistants, and senior care workers. This allows employers to recruit at a lower salary threshold. However, jobs below intermediate skills level are still excluded.</p>	<p>Partial alignment</p> <p>The addition of some health and social care occupations to the Shortage Occupation List eases recruitment. Strong support for recruitment to key services indicates support for including lower skill levels in the PBS for key services.</p>
<p>Temporary seasonal work, for example in fruit picking and hospitality</p> <p>67% support</p>	<p>A Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (SAWs) is currently in operation. There is no such scheme for other sectors, including hospitality.</p>	<p>Partial alignment</p> <p>Indicates support for SAWs scheme, but also for temporary schemes in other sectors.</p>

Base: all respondents (4,000); Fieldwork dates 18 June to 10 July 2021.

Our findings show divergence across a number of key principles of government policy, including towards the skills threshold, which is likely to be the most substantial barrier faced by employers in the coming months.

The findings are also quite striking given that respondents to the survey may have been aware that lower skilled workers from the European Union have formed a substantial part of UK immigration from the EU: in 2017, some 1 in 6 workers in lower skilled jobs were from the EU.²² Debates in the lead-up to the EU referendum focused strongly on free movement of workers from Eastern and Central Europe for jobs in lower skilled sectors such as hospitality, construction and food processing. The indications are that many people have considered the contribution made by migrants to the economy and are supportive of measures that enable employers to continue to recruit them post-Brexit.

Varying support for migration to help the UK recover from the pandemic

The survey asked about the potential role of new migration in assisting the Covid-19 economic recovery. It is important to consider the context in which this question was asked: at the time of the survey in July 2021 the UK was still in the throes of the Covid-19 pandemic with some restrictions in place, many people working from home and businesses operating at less than optimal capacity.

The UK unemployment rate was 4.8%, some 1.6 million people. However, it was unevenly spread with levels as high as 6.5% in London and 5.8% in the North East.²³ The number of pay-rolled employees in July 2021 was 28.9 million, 206,000 below levels before the Covid-19 pandemic.²⁴ Levels of youth unemployment were also considerably higher than average, at almost 12% among 18-24 year olds. In addition, roughly 11.6 million people are still on the Government's Job Retention Programme, or Furlough Scheme, waiting to return to work.²⁵

The survey asked:

'If British businesses said that they need an additional supply of skills and labour to assist with the economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, how strongly would you support or oppose a temporary relaxation in immigration restrictions for work, for example extending existing visas or granting more visas in areas where there are labour shortages?'

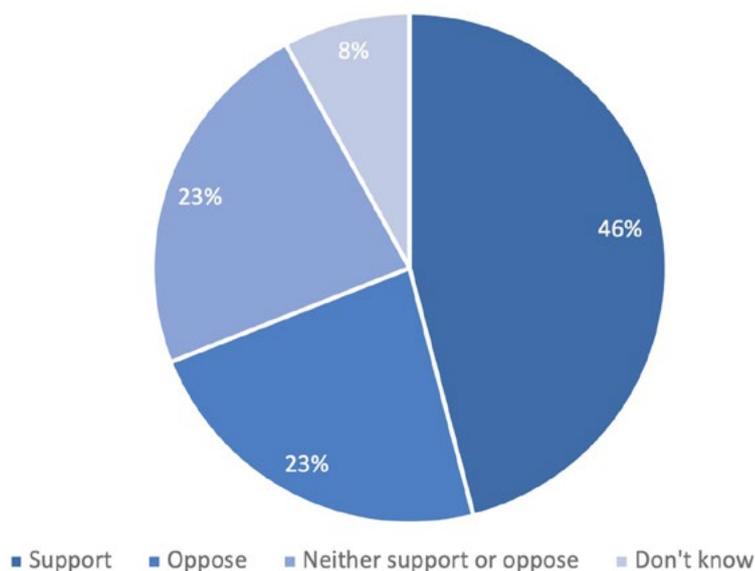
What did we find?

Around twice as many people (46%) said they would support relaxing immigration rules to help businesses with the pandemic recovery, than said they would oppose this measure (23%). There is stronger support among Labour supporters (57%) than Conservatives (42%).

The overall figure of 46% is lower than might be expected from responses to other questions, in particular given that almost two-thirds (65%) agree that employers should be able to recruit from overseas to any job where there are shortages. Responses may reflect a lack of certainty about need, given the rate of unemployment and the number of people still furloughed. At the same time, since it gains support from almost half of balancers (47%) and three-quarters of liberals (74%), it adds to the evidence from other responses that the public favours flexible and responsive policies, rather than a rigid approach.

Fig 2.3: Public support for relaxing immigration rules to help businesses with the pandemic recovery

“If British businesses said that they needed an additional supply of skills and labour to assist with the economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, how strongly would you support or oppose a temporary relaxation in immigration restrictions for work, for example extending existing visas or granting more visas in areas where there are labour shortages?”



Base: all respondents (4,000); Fieldwork dates 18 June to 10 July 2021.

Conclusions – What policies would meet the preferences of employers and the public in post-Covid-19 Britain?

In the early months of 2021 the pandemic resulted in an unusual situation of relatively low labour demand, so that the new immigration system was not used extensively and put to the test. This has now started to change, with employers in sectors such as transport, hospitality and construction reporting serious and widespread labour shortages.²⁶

Some labour shortages may be alleviated by the ending of the Furlough scheme on 30th September 2021 and by the easing of restrictions on foreign travel, which could result in the return of EU migrants who left the UK during the pandemic.²⁷ However,

these and other sectors have relied on a continuous flow of new migrants under free movement and restrictions on work visas are now much tighter: new migrants will need to meet the criteria for a skilled visa, which excludes many of the jobs in the sectors which are currently experiencing difficulties.²⁸

Employers have said they will look to recruit more local applicants should migrant numbers fall.²⁹ Those in sectors including hospitality, social care and construction say they want to attract more school and college leavers, as well as unemployed people, by improving career pathways.³⁰ Previous research by British Future finds the public supports this aim, expressing concern that free movement has reduced young people's opportunities.³¹ But the challenges should not be under-estimated. Sectors including food processing, hospitality and social care had failed to attract sufficient British workers long before free movement.³²

Business leaders are currently calling on the Government for greater flexibility, including through temporary visas.³³ While pressure is currently coming from a relatively small number of sectors, this may extend to other sectors in coming months. Employers may then call for solutions of a less temporary nature, and call for changes to the points-based system to allow for recruitment of lower skilled migrants. This will lead to pressure on the Government to relax restrictions, which currently allow work visas only for jobs at or above RQF level 3 – broadly equivalent to 'A' level – excluding roughly 1 in 3 jobs.³⁴

The Government may be nervous about making changes to the points-based system so soon, having built new policy around the principles of prioritising highly skilled migration and restricting entry to lower skilled roles. However, our findings suggest that the public would accept changes that meant employers were able to recruit to lower skilled as well as highly skilled roles.

The number of new and returning migrants will depend on the pace of recovery but, as discussed in Section 1, the public is now more concerned about control than numbers. Their survey responses confirm that people care about contribution as much as skill.³⁵ There is strong support for policies based on shortages and for recruitment to key services, including majority support for recruitment to lower skilled roles where vacancies are hard to fill.

The pandemic may have reinforced these sentiments as the public witnessed the contribution and personal sacrifices made by migrant workers. Other recent research by British Future and the Policy Unit at Kings College London found 7 in 10 people agreeing that the pandemic had shown how important migration is to staffing essential services like the NHS.³⁶ The same study found two-thirds of people agreeing that 'the coronavirus crisis has made me value the role of 'low skilled' workers, in essential services such as care homes, transport and shops, more than before'. It will not have gone unnoticed that many of those workers are migrants.

Attitudes towards migration for work are likely to have played a major role in the gradual warming of attitudes seen through responses to the tracker survey since 2016. The Government should take note of these changes, so that future immigration policy changes respond to a greater degree of consensus on immigration for work, and to closer alignment of public attitudes with the needs of employers and the economy.

Section 3: New migration from Hong Kong

The arrival of new migrants from Hong Kong looks set to become one of the defining migration stories for Britain in the 2020s. The decision to give the right to live and work in the UK to up to 3 million people from Hong Kong has been the largest discretionary migration policy decision made by the UK government in the immediate post-Brexit era. It is a decision that reflects many distinct features – given that the new visa route applies to British overseas nationals and their dependents. However, the breadth of political and public consent for this strikingly expansive decision illuminates several broader debates about UK migration attitudes, as well as being the highest-profile example of the argument of this Prime Minister that controlling migration can mean deciding to say yes as well as no.

What happens next will have an important impact on both the opportunities of thousands of Hong Kongers and on the experience of the communities that they join. So it is important that the UK government has begun with a commitment to a more proactive stance towards welcoming and integration than towards any previous wave of migration to the UK. Whether or not migration from Hong Kong and the integration of Hong Kongers is perceived to be a success is likely to have a significant impact in the future public and political confidence of the UK towards future migration – and so it is in everybody's interest to get this right from the start.

What the public thinks of the new Hong Kong policy

This was the first time that the Ipsos MORI Immigration Attitudes Tracker included questions about the new Hong Kong visa route – asking about public views of the new policy, exploring the different potential motives for people's views on Hong Kongers coming to Britain; and making an initial attempt to gauge the extent to which public views may be contingent on the numbers who arrive.

It finds broad support from the public for the right of Hong Kong citizens with the status of British National (Overseas) to come and start new lives in the UK. Over two-thirds (68%) of the public support the government giving at least some Hong Kong citizens the right to come and live in the UK – outnumbering by more than five to one the 12% of people who oppose the decision. The consensus in favour crosses all demographic and political boundaries.

Fig 3.1: Public support for new migration from Hong Kong

“Which of the following statements, if any, comes closest to your view about those with BN(O) status coming to live in the UK from Hong Kong?”



Base: all respondents (4,000); Fieldwork dates 18 June to 10 July 2021.

There is a combination of different and overlapping drivers of support for the decision. The most popular reason was that this is morally the right thing to do – with six out of ten supporters of the decision (59%) citing this as the reason. In this survey, the ethical case is complemented by support for securing the benefits that Hong Kong migrants will bring to Britain, with 35% citing this. The value of sending a message to China, that Britain disagrees with its approach to Hong Kong, is similarly supported by a third (34%) of supporters.

An indication that future public support may also be contingent on how migration and integration is handled comes in responses to whether or not the offer to Hong Kong nationals should be unrestricted. The public is fairly evenly divided on whether they would take all eligible Hong Kongers who choose to come to the UK, or just some of those who apply. Taking all eligible applicants is supported by 35% of the public, while 33% feel there should be a cap on the number of people who can use this route. Labour voters (42%) are moderately more likely than Conservatives (34%) to favour the most open option, while a minority of just 8% of Labour voters and 15% of Conservatives are opposed to Hong Kongers coming to the UK.

Older respondents were more likely to support an unrestricted approach to admitting Hong Kongers, with 39% of people aged 65 and older in favour of accepting all who apply, compared to 29% of 18-24 year olds. This is a contrasting pattern to migration attitudes generally, where older respondents tend to be more sceptical about the scale and pace of migration. This higher support among older people in this case is likely to reflect more awareness of the historic ties between the UK and Hong Kong and greater knowledge of the 1997 UK handover to China. There is also higher support among those with university degrees. Young people were more likely to say ‘don’t know’ to this question about numbers of arrivals from Hong Kong.

The rationale for the Hong Kong decision was a recognition of Britain's historic responsibilities. Yet the Hong Kong migration debate can also be seen as exemplifying a shifting and softening public approach to migration. Given the scale of the policy commitment, it is remarkable that there has been unanimous cross-party support in the House of Commons – when the issue of whether Britain should allow Hong Kongers to come to Britain had previously seen one of the most heated migration debates of that era,³⁷ with Paddy Ashdown and Norman Tebbit being the most prominent voices. As Professor Will Jennings has noted, Gallup polling from 1990 shows the public opposed by a two-to-one margin to government proposals to admit a limited number of Hong Kong nationals, which has flipped to broad support today.

The case demonstrates that views of ethnicity and demographic change do not dominate contemporary British migration attitudes. Historic ties with an English-speaking group, perceived as both positive economic contributors and being in need of protection, generate broader support for this visa offer to East Asian people from Hong Kong than, for example, free movement from the rest of Europe.³⁸ This is incompatible with the claim that views about immigration control are primarily rationalisations for ethnic preferences.

So both the government decision and the public response to it are proof that numbers are not always trumps in immigration policy. The findings also suggest, however, that if migration flows turn out to be large, continued public support is likely to be contingent on the perception that the government is managing the pressures effectively, as well as welcoming the economic gains.

Support for the Hong Kong policy is a migration issue that spans the 2016 referendum divide. It has been less often noticed that the Hong Kong decision is also the most significant exemption to date from the stated principle that post-Brexit immigration policy should be 'geography blind'. No national immigration system has ever adopted this principle without exceptions, as the UK's distinct treatment of Ireland post-Brexit also captures.

Welcoming Hong Kongers: how to get it right from the start

Nobody knows how many Hong Kongers will come to Britain. The Home Office has a broad estimate of around 300,000 arrivals over 5 years – though a lesson of the recent past seared into the minds of government policy-makers is the uncertainty of making projections, still less predictions, about future migration flows. Many 'known unknowns' will affect the scale, pace and composition of Hong Kong migration to the UK, including China's approach to the territory after the passing of its national security law and how British overseas nationals respond, in the short-term, to the increased security of having a visa route to Britain. The course of the pandemic and post-Covid-19 economic conditions in the UK and Hong Kong will also impact the decisions of students,

workers and others. Cost will undoubtedly be a factor too, with immigration fees alone estimated to be as high as £12,000 for a family of four.³⁹

A central reason for the loss of public confidence in the handling of EU migration after 2004 was that the government did not anticipate, prepare for or respond quickly enough to the scale of arrivals. There are positive early signs that these lessons have been learnt. The initial commitment of a £43 million dedicated support package, including support for local government and regional migration hubs, is a good start.

If integration is a two-way street, there are strong foundations to build from in welcoming Hong Kongers. Those arriving on the BN(O) route will often have advantages in understanding the rights and responsibilities of those who come to Britain. The UK government's initial commitments are more proactive than for previous rounds of migration and integration. But there will be many specific challenges when putting into practice the aspiration of welcoming Hong Kongers.

Three initial challenges to get the foundations right include working out what data to collect; how to share this in real time with relevant stakeholders; and how to ensure that Hong Kongers themselves, across a range of perspectives, have a clear voice to influence integration policy and practice.

The public policy challenge in understanding need is that those who come from Hong Kong under the new visa route will be a highly diverse and shifting group, reflecting all of the different reasons why people migrate to Britain: to study and to work, to invest and to seek sanctuary and protection. Some Hong Kongers who choose to come to Britain may have strong and established links in the UK, as investors and professionals, with little need for further official support. Other young professionals and families will have different needs for navigation and advice.

Some will have been forced to leave their homes, to an unfamiliar place, with little notice or preparation – mostly coming to Britain outside the asylum system but with analogous support needs to other groups of refugees. The English language needs of Hong Kongers may also differ from other groups of migrants undertaking English courses as speakers of other languages: there will often be less need for basic English fluency. How to access more technical English, for work and professional use, may be important if Hong Kong migrants are to use their educational and professional skills and qualifications.

Existing Hong Kong and British Chinese communities will often be of cultural value for new arrivals, but this will bring potential challenges too. The Hong Kongers of the 2020s will have different experiences and expectations from those who came several decades ago. Universities will be hosting international students from China and Hong Kong with very different views. As well as upholding free speech, students will have concerns about security arising from

the geopolitical context. Fundamentally, integration into British society is not the task of minority communities but of British society as a whole, together with the new arrivals themselves – so the challenge for policy-makers, employers and civic society is to consider how the full range of actors can play their appropriate role.

Because this was a proactive policy decision, the Home Office and Communities department have the opportunity to work more proactively with economic and civic society stakeholders, building on the positive examples of the EU settlement scheme and Syrian resettlement. National and regional policy must manage the practical pressures well – and should be mindful of how to secure the opportunities offered too. The Scottish Government aspires to a more open migration policy than the new post-Brexit system allows – so will want to ensure that it proactively markets opportunities to live and work in Scotland to Hong Kongers, as a destination in finance, tech, higher education and other sectors. Government and other city-regions may also see an opportunity for the levelling-up agenda, if they can find practical ways to spread the gains, and so disperse some of the population pressures on housing and services too.

Welcoming Hong Kongers and facilitating their integration into a new society requires a two-way relationship between the welcomers and the welcomed. How well this is done may influence how Britain thinks about immigration and integration in the decade to come.

Section 4 - Asylum seekers and refugees

The UK's approach to protecting refugees fleeing war and persecution has been the subject of much discussion in recent weeks following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, with images of desperate Afghans clinging to departing planes in order to flee the country. A new UK resettlement scheme will offer 5,000 Afghan citizens a place of safety over the next 12 months, with a further 15,000 resettled over the coming years.⁴⁰

This tracker research was conducted prior to the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and responses will not reflect any shifts in attitudes that might be prompted by the Afghan refugee crisis. Previous research suggests that highly salient events, such as the war in Syria or the image of drowned toddler Alan Kurdi, can affect attitudes and the public's appetite for action. It will be interesting to see whether our next wave of the Immigration Attitudes Tracker research shows significant movement from this baseline. However, recent YouGov polling for The Times on 17-18 August⁴¹ found that around half of Britons (52%) say they would support a resettlement scheme for Afghan refugees fleeing the Taliban. Some 29% were opposed.

While the public salience of immigration has fallen significantly over the last 10 years, the UK's approach to asylum and refugee protection has retained a high public profile – despite refugees and asylum-seekers making up a much smaller proportion of UK immigration than those coming to Britain to work or study. Pictures of migrants arriving in the UK after crossing the Channel in small boats have received media attention, particularly over spring and summer months when conditions at sea are favourable for these dangerous journeys. The Government's Nationality and Borders Bill, which emphasises reforms to the UK asylum system, was also working its way through the parliamentary decision-making process when this survey was conducted.

The survey finds that most of the public has sympathy for people crossing the Channel by boat; but also that a sizable minority has little or no sympathy. And while there is some consensus regarding how people are treated once they are here, it also finds considerable public division and uncertainty regarding the approach that the UK should take towards those coming to the UK seeking protection as refugees.

That approach may soon change. The Nationality and Borders Bill proposes sweeping reforms to the UK's system of refugee protection, some of which undermine the principles of the UN Refugee Convention that Britain signed 70 years ago in 1951.⁴³ In particular, it proposes to treat people seeking international protection in the UK differently according to how they arrived in

the country, with those who make their own way to the UK, rather than through a UN resettlement programme, no longer entitled to full refugee protection.

Under the new proposals thousands of people who would currently be accepted as refugees would no longer be granted refugee status in the UK due to the method of their arrival, but could instead apply for temporary protection lasting up to 36 months.

The survey also examined public attitudes to how those awaiting an asylum decision are treated, in particular regarding the prohibition on people being allowed to work for up to a year while their claim is being processed. On this issue the picture of public attitudes is somewhat clearer, with majorities feeling that it would be beneficial if people were allowed to work.

Most people have sympathy for asylum seekers who arrive by boat

Respondents were asked how much sympathy they have with people attempting to come to Britain by boat. Most (53%) say they have some sympathy, while 20% say they don't have much sympathy and another 20% say they have no sympathy at all. These findings are broadly similar to those of August 2019, when channel crossings were frequent, as they were during this survey period.

This is an issue on which women and men think differently, with six in ten women (61%) expressing a great deal or fair amount of sympathy, compared to a minority of men (45%). Younger people are significantly more sympathetic than those in older age groups, with two-thirds (65%) of 18-34s expressing sympathy compared to 42% of over-55s.

Levels of sympathy also differed significantly across political divides, with three-quarters of Labour voters expressing sympathy (75%) compared to just over a third of Conservatives (35%).

Fairness prioritised over deterrence

More people would prefer a system that is fair, even if that means numbers who settle are higher, than an asylum system that prioritises deterrence. Yet neither option secures majority support overall and there is significant division by people's political support.

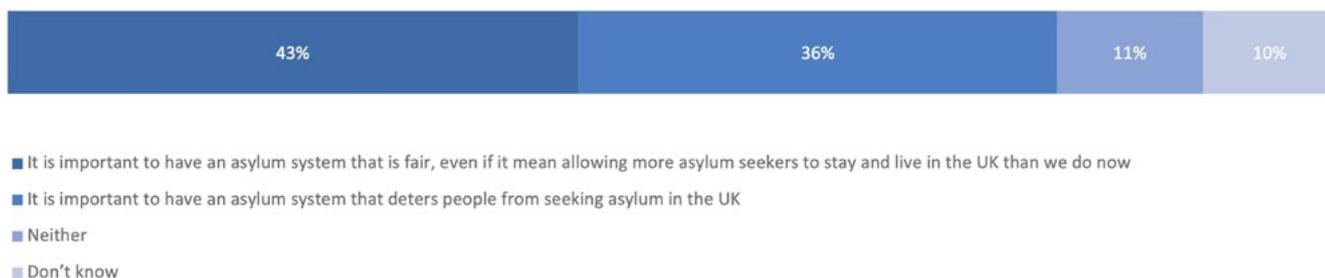
We asked people 'when thinking about how the UK processes people who arrive in Britain seeking asylum, which of the following two statements comes closest to your views?':

1. It is important to have an asylum system that is fair, even if that means allowing more asylum seekers to stay and live in the UK than we do now.
2. It is important to have an asylum system that deters people from seeking asylum in the UK.

Some 43% said they preferred a system that prioritises fairness, while just over a third (36%) feel that it is more important to have an asylum system that deters people from seeking asylum in the UK. Labour voters are more supportive of an approach based on fairness than deterrence, with 63% supporting this first option, compared to 28% of Conservatives, a majority of whom (54%) favour deterrence.

Fig 4.1: Does the public prioritise fairness or deterrence in the UK asylum system?

“When thinking about how the UK processes people who arrive in Britain seeking asylum, which of the following statements comes closest to your views?”



Base: all respondents (4,000); Fieldwork dates 18 June to 10 July 2021.

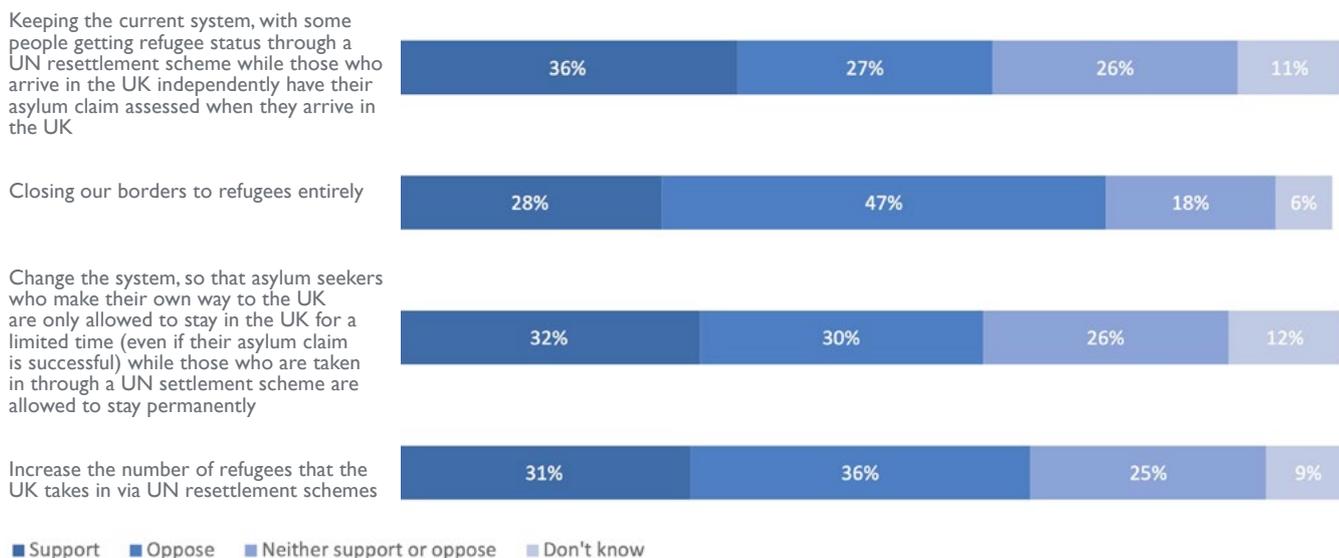
In line with their greater sympathy for asylum seekers, women and young people are more likely to emphasise fairness over deterrence. Twice as many 18-34s favour a system prioritising fairness (52%) than one based on deterrence (26%), while those aged over 55 are slightly more likely to favour deterrence (46%) than fairness (38%). Women favour fairness over deterrence by 45% to 32%, while men are evenly split 41%-41%.

Public divided over new Government proposals

As noted above, there are currently two main routes through which people seek asylum in the UK. First, where people make their own way to the UK, and make an asylum claim when they arrive, as they are legally permitted to do. The second route is where the UK takes limited numbers of refugees already identified by the United Nations (UN), and assists them with travel and settlement in the UK. These are known as UN resettlement schemes. The survey explained this system and asked people whether they supported or opposed changes.

Fig 4.2: Public attitudes to UK asylum policies

“To what extent would you support or oppose each of the following measures relating to asylum seekers in the UK?”



Base: all respondents (4,000); Fieldwork dates 18 June to 10 July 2021.

The most favoured option – supported by 36% – was to keep the current system, whereby some people get refugee status through a UN resettlement scheme while those who make their own way to the UK have their asylum claim assessed when they arrive in the UK. This was opposed by just over a quarter of respondents (27%).

When it comes to making changes to the current system, the public are divided: almost a third (32%) support the Government’s proposed changes, with asylum seekers who make their own way to the UK only allowed to stay for a limited time while those who arrive through a UN resettlement scheme are allowed to stay permanently. Around the same number of people (30%) oppose this idea, while 26% are neither supportive nor opposed. As with other questions on asylum, there are marked differences by political allegiance: some 44% of Conservative voters would support this system, compared to 27% of Labour voters.

Three in ten people (31%) support increasing the number of refugees that the UK takes in via UN resettlement schemes, while slightly more people (36%) oppose an expansion of resettlement. There is considerable difference by age: Four in ten 18-34s (39%) support extending resettlement and 23% are opposed; while nearly half of those aged over 55 (46%) oppose more resettlement, with just a quarter (26%) in support. Conservative voters are more likely to oppose this measure (53%) than Labour supporters (20%).

Some 28% of respondents would prefer the UK to stop protecting refugees entirely and close the border to refugees, with a hardcore 14% saying they fully support this idea. Around half of the public (47%) would oppose such a move, with 26% saying they are fully opposed.

Most people support the right of asylum seekers to work

While the public remains divided as to how the UK decides who can get refugee protection, there is more common ground when it comes to how refugees and asylum seekers are treated once they are here.

At present, people seeking asylum in the UK are not allowed to work while they wait for their asylum claim to be decided and must rely on state support, unless it takes more than a year to get a decision. Those who have waited for more than a year are permitted to apply for permission to work but are restricted to occupations on the Government's Shortage Occupation List.

The Lift The Ban coalition of organisations representing asylum seekers and refugees has campaigned to change this rule, pointing out that – as well as costing the state money – it increases isolation, hampers integration and can exacerbate community tensions.

Most people (58%) agree that asylum seekers might have useful skills and experience and should be allowed to work, while only 15% disagree. Half of Conservative voters (50%) also agree, with 23% opposed, while Labour voters (70%) are more strongly in favour.

Two-thirds of people (66%) agree that allowing asylum seekers to work would reduce their need for state support, including majorities of both Conservatives (65%) and Labour voters (72%). Just 10% disagree.

Most people (58%) also agree that being allowed to work would help asylum seekers to learn English and integrate, while 17% disagree. Again, majorities of Labour voters (70%) and Conservative voters (51%) are in agreement.

This support for the right to work is somewhat caveated, however. Most people (54%) believe that giving asylum seekers the right to work could attract people to the UK who do not have a genuine asylum claim. Conservative voters (70%) are more likely to hold this view than Labour supporters (47%). There are also marked differences by age: fewer than half of 18-34 year-olds believe that giving asylum seekers this right would attract those without a genuine claim, while 63% of those aged 55 and over feel that it could.

What does all this mean for advocates of refugee and asylum rights?

Public division over refugee and asylum issues is nothing new: indeed, while media debate about channel crossings has been steadily heating up, it is nowhere near the intensity of the asylum debate during the Blair premiership of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Asylum numbers are also substantially lower today than they were during this period.⁴⁴

Advocates for refugee and asylum rights can find encouragement in the bedrock of majority sympathy for people making dangerous channel crossings by boat, alongside the public's prioritisation of fairness over deterrence. Arguments founded on basic human compassion and principles of fairness may therefore be persuasive, with our survey suggesting that women and younger people may be the warmest audiences. Other surveys have also found majority support for the principle of offering protection to refugees.⁴⁵

What a 'fair' system looks like to the majority of the public, however, is less clear. Low levels of satisfaction with the government's handling of immigration suggest that the current approach does not inspire public confidence; yet our survey found similar levels of support – around one-third – for expanding resettlement, the new twin-track system proposed by the Nationality and Borders Bill and for the current approach. Advocates can find some encouragement here: the public is not crying out for the asylum reforms proposed by Home Secretary Priti Patel, which do not share the levels of public support that the points-based system for migration for work enjoyed prior to its implementation. Yet there is little evidence of strong opposition to the proposals either. The debate remains up for grabs and with the Home Secretary seizing every opportunity to make the case for these reforms, protection advocates will need to make a strong case for an alternative system that satisfies the public demand for fairness.

Previous research has identified public support for an asylum system that is 'efficient, fair and humane' and campaigners could look to start fleshing out what would be needed to make this a reality. That could include investment in processing claims more quickly and dealing with backlogs, so people are not left in limbo, reliant on state benefits as they wait for a decision. A corollary of that may also include international cooperation to enable the safe return of those without a legitimate claim.

Advocates may also be in tune with public opinion when campaigning for people's right to work while waiting for an asylum claim. As this survey finds, most of the public supports both the moral and economic cases for reform in this area. And if a growing post-Covid-19 UK economy results in labour shortages, they may find employers backing their cause too. Advocates may, however, need to win the argument that this will not act as a draw to economic migrants, which may involve concessions that asylum seekers could only take up jobs on the shortage occupation list.

Such policy solutions may be a compromise too far for some. But advocates will need to be able to make a pragmatic case for a system that combines compassion with control in order to take some of the heat out of the asylum debate and secure majority support.

Conclusion

Since 2016, after years at or near the top of the charts of public concerns, immigration has gradually become a less heated issue. Other concerns have become more dominant and successive polls show that people view immigration more positively. This survey, the latest in a series of 12 waves of the Immigration Attitudes Tracker, finds this trend towards a softening of attitudes continuing.

Public opinion is shaped by events and by changes of circumstances and policy. That means it could change further in future – in a positive or negative direction. Since the Brexit vote and the end of free movement, attitudes to migration for work – once a highly salient topic, particularly with regard to lower-skilled migration – have become considerably warmer. The pandemic has prompted a greater appreciation of the lower-skilled workers who kept the economy going. Widespread support for those working in the caring professions – in the NHS and also in social care for the elderly – may also lie behind the uptick in support, particularly among older people, for migration to fill vacancies in these sectors.

The narrative that the public opposes lower skilled migration always had a mixed evidence base, but our findings suggest that need and social value are more important to the public than qualification level. Today, this research finds that most people would support a relaxation of immigration rules if employers needed more lower-skilled workers. If the post-Covid-19 UK economy continues to grow, employers may well be making that case quite forcefully.

Attitudes to refugee and asylum protection are subject to similar fluctuations. Most people have sympathy for people forced to make dangerous sea crossings in small boats in order to get to the UK. But the steady stream of images of such crossings – exemplifying a lack of the control over UK borders that the public wants to see maintained – is likely to have contributed to tougher attitudes on asylum. While 43% of people want a system that prioritises fairness, even if that means allowing more asylum seekers to come to the UK, that is not a significant lead over the 36% who would prioritise a system focused on deterring people from seeking asylum in the UK.

Events and their portrayal in the media can change opinion in the other direction too. Following China's crackdown against democracy and free speech in Hong Kong, the UK made a generous offer to take in the many Hong Kong residents with British National (Overseas) status, offering them the right to stay in the UK and a route to full citizenship. Our survey finds majority support for this offer, albeit with some respondents preferring to limit numbers. Supporters feel that it is the morally right thing to do – perhaps having seen some of the extensive media coverage of events in Hong Kong. This survey was conducted before the US and UK withdrawal from Afghanistan, and with stories emerging of Taliban abuses against women, minorities and human rights

defenders, the next wave of the tracker may find increased support for resettlement and for refugee protection more broadly. When people can see, on the evening news, why some people need to flee their homes, they are likely to have more sympathy for those forced to seek asylum in the UK and other countries.

This narrative of warming attitudes has implications for the policy and politics of immigration. The focus on migration numbers, previously reinforced each quarter by repeated failures to meet the government's net migration target, is being gradually supplanted by broad agreement on principles, in particular the need for control and a system that meets the needs of business and public services.

If the government is inclined to listen to the public on immigration, it has permission to pursue more liberal policies, most clearly in relation to migration for work, within the 'control' framework of its new points-based system. It remains to be seen whether world events and their portrayal in the UK media may prompt shifts that open up similar space for a more welcoming approach to refugees fleeing persecution. The early indicators of public support for a UK Afghan resettlement programme are a positive start. Opponents of a more open approach to migration, whether for work, study or humanitarian protection, will still be vocal and will find a constituency of support. Advocates for a more welcoming approach will still need to take much of the 'balancer' middle of opinion – around half the UK public – with them if they are to build a winning coalition of support for reform. What this new study of warming public attitudes shows is that they may now find more space than before to make their case.

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