

Beyond the net migration target

How to restore confidence in our immigration system after decades of broken promises



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ONWARD >

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Thanks

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Summary of the argument



The ambition to reduce net migration to the tens of thousands has been the Government's statement of intent on immigration for a decade. It now stands as a visible statement of failure, despite the concerted efforts of two Conservative Prime Ministers.

In 2010, the net migration pledge seemed both achievable and politically sensible. Immigration and the contribution people who have come here from all over the world make has benefited the UK over many years, and continues to today. However, after Labour presided over a four-fold increase in net migration, including grossly underestimating the inflows from the EU-8 accession countries, public concern grew over the level of immigration.¹ At the time, the vast majority of net migration came from outside the EU, and was therefore within Ministers' control.

Nine years later, however, net migration has never fallen below 177,000 in a single year and last year stood at 253,000 per annum.² This is the equivalent of adding a city the size of Newcastle upon Tyne to the UK population in a single year. If net migration had been controlled to the tens of thousands each year since 2010, 1.4 million fewer migrants, in net terms, would have been added to the UK population.³ The level of net migration today is more than five times higher than the average level in the two decades up to 1997.

People have stopped believing that politicians have the ability or desire to reduce migration to historically sustainable levels. In 2014, YouGov found that while 78% of people supported the net migration pledge, just 15% of people believe that the Government would implement the policy ahead of the 2015 election.⁴ The 85% were right. But people still want immigration reduced: in June 2018, Deltapoll found 73% think reducing immigration to the tens of thousand is right, compared to 15% wrong.⁵

It is clear that the net migration target is neither delivering lower net migration or restoring confidence that politicians mean what they say on immigration. As a policy, it has neither the teeth nor the buy-in across government to meaningfully change departmental behaviour, and it is a crude measure open to misinterpretation. The challenge for the next Prime Minister is how to move away from the pledge while maintaining public trust on one of the most salient political issues.

This challenge has been recognised by the two candidates for the future leadership of the Conservative Party, who have proposed a points-based system and the abolition of the net migration target respectively. The risk with both proposals is that neither will deliver net migration control: points-based systems typically increase net migration and the abolition of the target with no alternative will release pressure on Whitehall.

This paper proposes a robust and detailed framework for immigration control – one that ensures greater accountability to Parliament and the public, and ensures that government departments can no longer neglect their own contribution to controlling migration or generating domestic skills - and could sit alongside both the existing tier-based system or a points-based alternative. We recommend that the next Prime Minister should:

1. Replace the tens of thousands pledge with a detailed and transparent Sustainable Immigration Plan

The Home Office should publish a detailed multi-year Sustainable Immigration Plan, setting out ministers' objectives for the level and composition of migration across different routes, updated on a rolling basis every year. This would take advantage of the fact that, post-Brexit, Britain will have control of all immigration routes and therefore can more directly influence the flows of migrants on different routes. It would firmly signal the principle – believed by the public but largely disregarded by politicians – that the level and mix of migration to the UK are factors within ministers' control. This is evidently particularly important in the wake of the 2016 vote to leave the European Union.

While the composition of this plan would be for Ministers to decide, we recommend that this includes a specific commitment to reduce low – and medium-skilled migration over time. Clear evidence from the Bank of England and Migration Advisory Committee shows that this undermines wages and jobs at the lower end of the labour market and most contributes to public antipathy to migration. If the next Prime Minister wanted to take a tougher stance, they could frame this Sustainable Migration Plan with an approach similar to the fiscal rules: for example, the Government might target falling net migration every year of the forecast, with net low-skilled migration falling faster and high-skilled migration rising in relative terms.

2. The Government should present the Sustainable Immigration Plan to Parliament every year

The Government's Sustainable Immigration Plan should be presented to Parliament, in precisely the same way as the Chancellor's plans for tax and spending. A new protocol should be established to mandate the Home Secretary to set out the government's intentions and the intended impact on both immigration and emigration across different routes, skill levels and nationalities. This should include not only Home Office policies but the policies of other departments to meet the Government's plans.

Alongside, detailed information should be deposited in the House of Commons Library setting out the expected immigration impact from each government department, in the same way as the HM Treasury Red Book and Budget literature set out annual departmental expenditure and income. This would ensure that all departments are held accountable for their immigration impact and create a structural incentive for departments to take migration into account when designing policy.

3. Ministers should establish an Office for Migration Responsibility (OMR) to hold ministers to account

In the same way as George Osborne established the Office for Budget Responsibility as "a rod for the Chancellor's own back" on fiscal discipline, a new Office for Migration Responsibility should be established to keep ministers honest about immigration control and provide an independent assessment of the impact of government forecasts and wider trends on flows.

The OMR would be established by putting the Migration Advisory Committee on a statutory footing and expanding its remit to examine and report on the sustainability of the net migration. In doing so, it could move from an advisory to an investigative

role – holding Government accountable for the impact of government policies on immigration through forecasting and long term projections. To aid this process, the OMR should have access to government-wide information on aggregate migration flows and projections, at Whitehall and local authority level. At present, government data on immigration is patchy, incomplete and inconsistently collected, which contributes to continued failures to control net migration.

These steps would restore political accountability for immigration and ensure all departments have their feet held to the fire. They would address the great problem with immigration policy – that the public have lost confidence in the promises that politicians make.

The challenge

*Why the net migration target was
reasonable and why it failed*

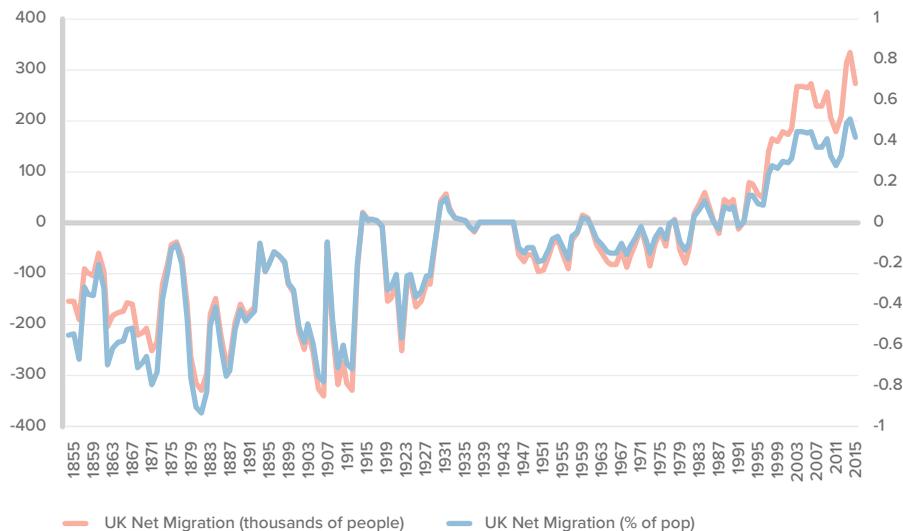


This section describes the history and problems with the net migration target, which served a political purpose but has failed to deliver its objectives and led to a considerable loss of trust from members of the public in ministers' ability or desire to keep immigration at sustainable levels. The next section sets out our recommendations to transform political accountability for immigration control to restore public confidence and support the transition to sustainable levels.

1. Why focus on net migration

- Early on in his leadership, David Cameron had made clear he believed the overall level of migration – not just its component parts – mattered. In 2007, he argued the case for paying attention to net migration, as part of addressing increasing strain on services and infrastructure: “In an advanced, open economy there will be high levels of both emigration and immigration. But what matters is the net figure, which I believe is currently too high”.⁶
- Historically this was true. In fact, for many years the UK experienced net emigration rather than immigration. Between 1855 and the end of the First World War, Britain saw higher levels of emigration than immigration in every single year, and for most of the Twentieth Century recorded net emigration in numerical terms. It was only in the late 1990s that net migration of the tens of thousands became commonplace, after which it has never returned to its historical levels.

Figure 1: Net migration of all citizens to the UK



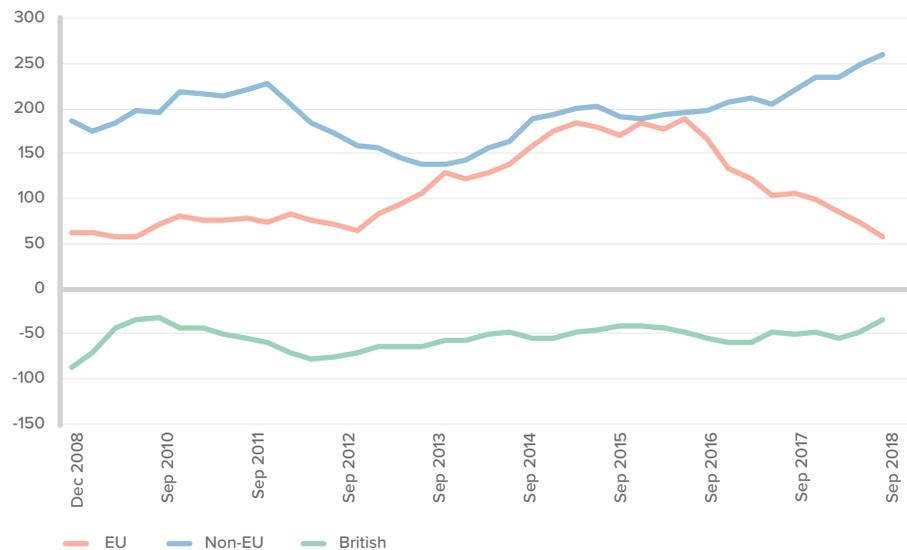
- The net migration pledge was therefore a powerful statement of intent. It was also politically advantageous: the Labour Party had presided over a four-fold increase in the level of migration between 1997 and 2010.⁷ In the two decades to 1997, net migration averaged fewer than 50,000 and never exceeded 100,000 a year. Between Labour's landslide victory and the Coalition Government, net migration quadrupled – with an average 198,000 net additional migrants arriving every year between 1997 and 2010.⁸

- Public perception of immigration had also been exacerbated by Tony Blair’s unilateral decision to forgo transitional controls at the time of EU-8 accession in 2004. When the decision was taken this was estimated to lead to just a few thousand additional migrants from new EU Member States, but in fact it resulted in the UK population of EU-8 born residents multiplying five-fold between 2004 and 2010. Unsurprisingly, immigration rose to being the first or second most important issue for voters in the run up to the 2010 election.

2. Why reducing net migration to the tens of thousands seemed achievable

- If the focus on net migration was deliberate and reasonable, the “tens of thousands” target was an accident. In a television interview ahead of the 2010 General Election, Damian Green, then shadow home affairs spokesman, inadvertently pledged to take Britain’s net migration “back to the levels of the 1980s and 1990s”.⁹ This later became the “tens of thousands”.
- Yet even with this slip of the tongue, the pledge seemed achievable, given the vast majority of net migration came from outside the remit of EU freedom of movement. As David Cameron said in 2011: “In the year up to June 2010, net migration to our country from EU nationals was just 27,000... In the year up to June 2010, net migration from nationals of countries outside the EU to the UK totalled 198,000.”¹⁰ For an incoming Government, delivering net migration in the tens of thousands by reducing non-EEA migration seemed eminently possible.

Figure 2: Net migration of British, EU and Non EU Citizens

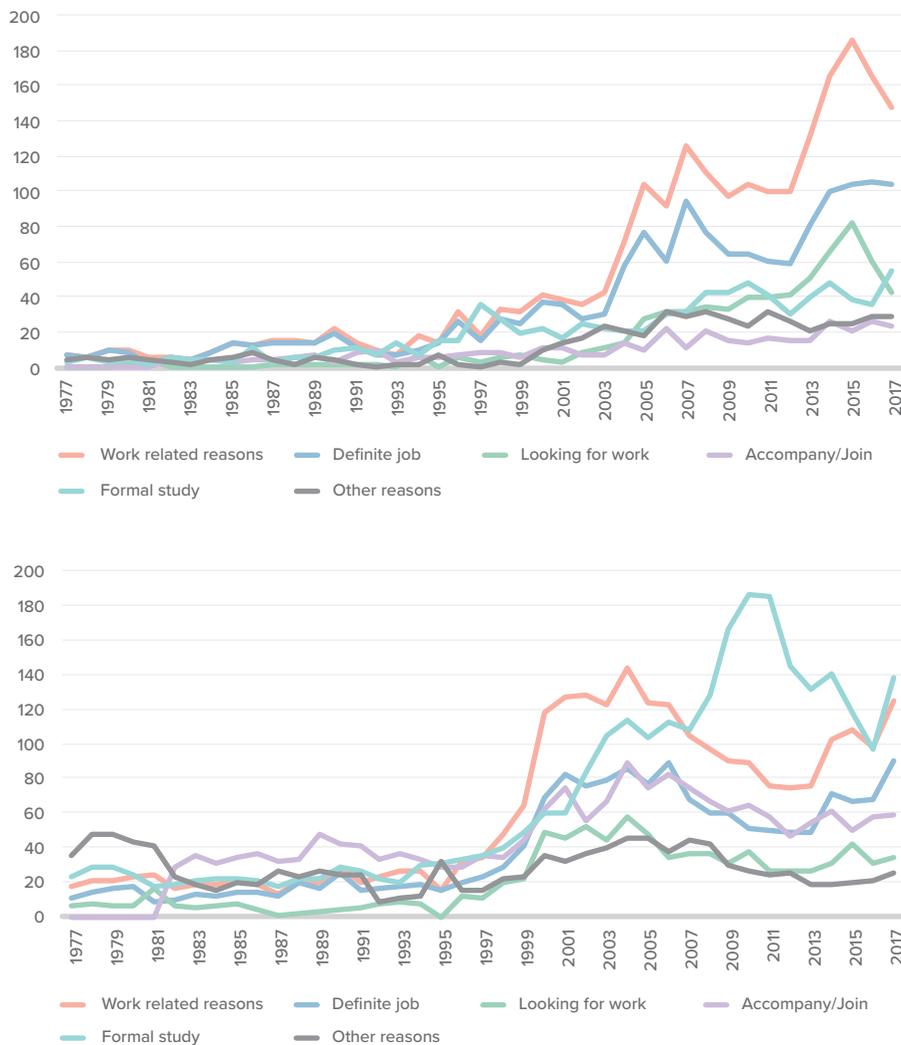


- In fact, in 2010, 2011 and 2012, year-end net migration from EU countries was 77,000, 82,000 and 82,000 respectively, suggesting that immigration outside direct government control (i.e. EEA migration) made up only a relatively small part of the overall picture. This suggested that the Government’s levers for non-EEA migration would be sufficient to drive down net migration.¹¹

3. Early success in bringing down numbers and providing clear political direction

- The early years of the Coalition saw some success in driving reductions in overall net immigration. The new Coalition Government announced a series of changes to immigration rules in November 2010 and February 2011 and net immigration fell from 256,000 in 2010 to 177,000 in 2012.¹²
- The Government's early action to deliver reductions in migration were also effective. For example, the clampdown on bogus colleges saw one third of colleges choose not to undergo inspection and almost 600 colleges removed from the Tier 4 sponsor register. As a result, non-EU long-term student migration fell from a high of 190,000 in September 2010 to 113,000 in June 2015.¹³

Figure 3: EU (top) and non-EU (bottom) inflows by main reason for migration

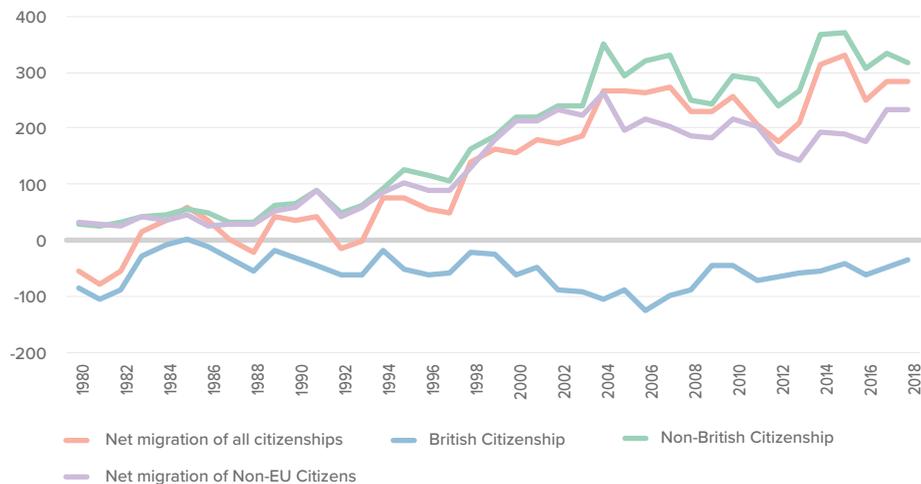


- The net migration target also seems to have created general downward pressure on the parts of the system within the Government’s control. Comparing the first full years of respective governments, there was an average annual increase in net migration of 16,000 on the previous year between 1998–2010, compared with 4,000 between 2011–2017. As shown in the chart below, net migration from non-EU countries fell considerably between 2010 and 2015, from 180,000 to just over 100,000. However, these reductions proved temporary and the pace of inward migration quickened later, partly due to increases from within the EU.

4. Early discipline was not replicated in later years and net migration has soared

Since 2012, the Government’s progress on reducing migration has stalled. This is primarily down to two factors: rising EU migration and rapid increases in Non-EU migration. Figure 4 below shows how the falls in non-EU migration between 2010–2012 were reversed in the four years before the 2016 referendum. Since 2016, non-EU migration has risen even further, with 261,000 more non-EU citizens coming to the UK than left in the year ending September 2018. This is the highest estimate since 2004.

Figure 4: Net migration by citizenship, UK, year ending December 2008 to year ending September 2018



This is likely exacerbated by the Government’s relative inaction in delivering further reductions in net migration. The last time the Government introduced direct measures to actively reduce migration was in 2016, when the last Immigration Act was passed in Parliament. Since then, most of the Government’s measures have added to net migration rather than reduced it.

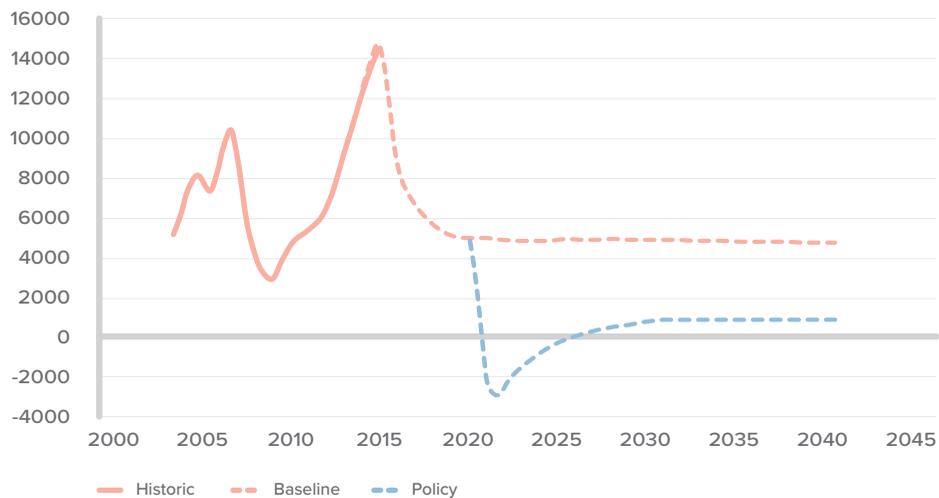
- This may be due to reduced commitment to the net migration target from recent Home Secretaries. Giving evidence to the Home Affairs Select Committee, Amber Rudd refused to endorse the target¹⁴ and her successor Sajid Javid has said that “there is no specific target” and repeatedly refused to answer whether he endorses the manifesto pledge.¹⁵ In the last quarterly statistics release, the Immigration Minister did not state any desire to reduce net migration, instead saying “net migration continues to be stable”.¹⁶

5. Efforts to reduce migration have not been supported by other parts of Whitehall

- The former Prime Minister, David Cameron, used to joke that there were only two Cabinet Ministers who actually wanted to reduce migration, himself and the then Home Secretary, Theresa May. In her own Cabinet, the Prime Minister may have felt even more isolated, with few Cabinet Ministers actively supporting the commitment.
- In fact, Whitehall incentivises higher immigration. For the Treasury, immigration brings GDP growth that helps fund pensions, welfare and public services. For the NHS, it provides much needed staff, whose training costs they don’t need to pay. Other departments face lobbying from sectors like universities and tech companies to increase visas. This explains why, at the same time as promising to reduce net migration, ministers have:
 - Removed doctors and nurses from the Tier 2 visa cap¹⁷
 - Doubled visas for technology, science, art and creative industries¹⁸
 - Introduced a pilot for Seasonal Agricultural Workers¹⁹
 - Extended the Tier 2 salary exemption to certain teachers²⁰
 - Introduced new Innovation Visas for entrepreneurs
 - Introduced new Start-up Visas for founders
- In addition to changes to the visa rules, ministers have also:
 - Talked about increasing student migration²¹
 - Split over the salary threshold for the post-Brexit immigration system²²
 - Considered offering visas as part of future trade deals with non-EU countries²³
 - Considered hiring up to 5,000 foreign nurses a year
 - Called for universal free movement of doctors and nurses
- They have faced calls beyond that for changes including:
 - Devolution of immigration policy to Scotland²⁴
 - Visas specifically for London²⁵
 - Scrap the income requirement for family migrants²⁶

- The Government’s recent Immigration White Paper did set out a series of proposals to reduce EU migration following Britain’s departure from the EU. It projected that changes would reduce long-term EU worker inflows to between 10,000 and 25,000 per annum in the first five years of the policy, reducing work-related EU migration to virtually zero for most of the 2020s and 2030s.²⁷
- However, the Home Secretary has actively distanced himself from the policy with the greatest potential impact, a £30,000 threshold for EU workers post-Brexit, and has asked the Migration Advisory Committee to review it.²⁸ The analysis also does not include changes from behavioural impacts, non-EEA workers, or temporary workers, further reducing its likely impact.

Figure 5: Estimated long-term net EU work-related migration



5. Continued public support for immigration control

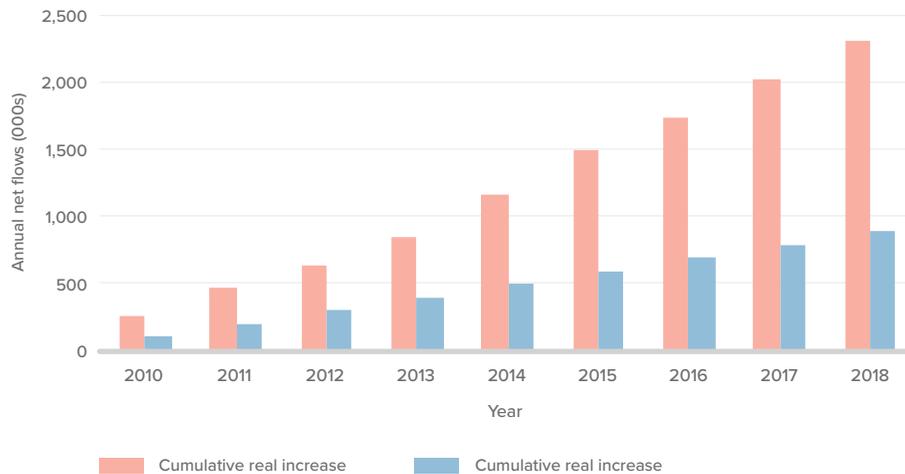
- Some people have argued that immigration is no longer a concern for the public, especially post-Brexit, and that the Government should abandon attempts to reduce migration. For example, British Future have pointed to polling showing that one in five people say they have become more positive about immigration since the Brexit vote (although one in four say they have become more negative)²⁹ and the BBC recently used the fact that immigration has fallen to its lowest ever rating on Ipsos MORI’s “most important issue facing the country” tracker to report that “Britain is now among the most positive countries internationally when considering immigration”.³⁰
- This is a limited reading of the evidence. While it is clear that immigration is becoming less important in relative terms, especially compared to Brexit and the economy, there is no real evidence to suggest that fewer people want net migration reduced than previously. In fact there continues to be widespread support for immigration control both pre – and post – the 2016 referendum:

- In 2014, a poll for YouGov found that 78% of people supported the net migration pledge³¹
- In December 2017, found that 44% of people thought the net migration target is desirable, versus 25% undesirable
- In March 2018, Ipsos Mori found that 54% want to reduce immigration, against 30% remain the same and 10% increase³²
- In April 2018, YouGov found 63% of people think immigration over the last ten years has been too high, compared to just 4% too low³³
- In May 2018, Ipsos MORI found that over half of people still want overall net migration numbers reduced and dissatisfaction with how the government is dealing with immigration had increased – up to 60% from 53% in February 2018³⁴
- In June 2018, Deltapoll found 73% think reducing immigration to the tens of thousand is right, compared to 15% wrong
- In March 2019, Ipsos MORI found that, while more than half of the respondents were positive about migration, the proportion of people who want to see immigration reduced remains stable at six in ten³⁵
- In March 2019, a megapoll of 10,000 people for Onward found that a majority of every age group, ethnicity and both Remain and Leave voters supported reducing immigration than opposed reducing immigration³⁶

6. The net result: a visible statement of failure

- The net migration pledge was a statement of intent. Nine years on it is a visible statement of failure. According to Ipsos MORI, over two-thirds – 69% – of people are not confident the Government will meet its net migration target.³⁷ An ICM poll in 2017 found that just 12% think it is achievable.³⁸
- This is unsurprising given net migration currently exceeds two and a half times the Government’s stated objective. Moreover, the cumulative impact of the Government’s failure to meet the net migration pledge is now substantial. If annual net migration had not exceeded 100,000 for the last nine years, net additions to the UK population from immigration from 2010–2018 would have been under 900,000 in total. In reality, cumulative net migration during that time amounted to 2.3 million people.³⁹

Figure 6: Cumulative increase in net migration, real and pledged



- In other words, there would be 1.4 million fewer people in the UK if the net migration pledge had been delivered in the last 9 years. This is equivalent to the population of Greater Merseyside, or slightly more than the cumulative inflow from migration during the nearly a quarter of a century between 1980 and 2003.
- Putting aside debates about the economic benefits or drawbacks of immigration or debates about culture or social integration, it is clear that the net migration target has failed on its own terms. It has failed to drive down net migration and as a result has further undermined public confidence. It has therefore lost all political value to the Conservatives and should be replaced. The question is with what.
- This is the question that the two candidates for the future leadership of the Conservative Party must confront. Both have made clear their support for replacing the net migration target, but neither has set out detailed plans to control migration instead. The proposal of a points-based immigration system, similar to that used by Australia and Canada, is popular but is typically used to significantly increase net migration in response to skills shortages. Without an annual cap, which would face similar problems to the existing net migration target, it would likely lead to higher net migration. While Jeremy Hunt has proposed abolishing the net migration target, he has not said with what. The next chapter sets out a detailed plan that can sit alongside either a points-based system or the existing tier-based immigration system.

The solution

*A new framework for
immigration accountability*



This section sets out a new framework to replace the net migration target and restore political accountability for, and public confidence in, immigration policy. It reflects the fact that after Britain has left the EU, immigration will be entirely within the Government's control.

1. Replace the net migration pledge with a detailed Sustainable Immigration Plan, updated every year

- The net migration pledge is high level and opaque. It has suffered from having no detailed plan to deliver it and the Home Office's failure to routinely publish detailed breakdowns of what kinds of migration it is seeking to encourage and discourage. However it is critical that Ministers do not abolish the ambition to reduce migration to the tens of thousands without a credible, alternative plan. This would be tantamount to accepting defeat in any attempt to reduce net migration.
- We recommend that the Government moves to a detailed and transparent Sustainable Immigration Plan, which would set out ministers' objectives for the level and composition of migration and be updated on a rolling basis every year. This would establish the principle that the level and mix of migration to the UK are factors within government's control post-Brexit. Clearly ministers will not have overall control of all migration flows until after Britain is no longer bound by Free Movement rules. However, this should not prevent the Government adopting a Sustainable Migration Plan in the meantime, albeit one that incorporated likely timelines for transition.
- This type of detailed approach is commonplace in other countries, including those many look to for inspiration for UK immigration reform. For example, Australia has an annual planning program, where it sets the number of permanent visas in the budget each year.⁴⁰

Table 1: Australia's 2019–20 migration programme planning levels

Skill stream	2019–20	Family Stream	2019–20
Employer Sponsored	30,000	Partner	39,799
Skilled Independent	18,652	Parent	7,371
Regional	23,000	Other Family	562
Skilled Employer Sponsored	9,000	Family Total	47,732
Skilled Work Regional	14,000		
State/Territory Nominated	24,968	Special Eligibility	236
Business Innovation & Investment program	6,862	Child (estimate; not subject to a ceiling)	3,350
Global Talent	5,000		
Distinguished Talent	200		
Skill Total	108,682		
Total	160,000		

- Similarly, Canada has a multi-year immigration levels plan – with statutory underpinning.⁴¹ It is currently using this to increase annual immigration, particularly for work, but there is no reason why the same approach could not be used to reduce annual levels of net migration, if politically desired.

Canada’s 2019–2021 immigration levels plan⁴²

Projected Admissions – Targets	2019		2020		2021	
	330,800		341,000		350,000	
Projected Admissions – Ranges	Low 2019	High 2019	Low 2020	High 2020	Low 2021	High 2021
Federal Economic, Provincial/Territorial Nominees	142,500	176,000	149,500	172,500	157,500	178,500
Quebec-selected Skilled Workers and Business	TBD	TBD	TBD	TBD	TBD	TBD
Family Reunification	83,000	98,000	84,000	102,000	84,000	102,000
Refugees, Protected Persons, Humanitarian and Other	43,000	58,500	47,000	61,500	48,500	64,500
Total	310,000	350,000	310,000	360,000	320,000	370,000

- This is not a suggestion that the UK should have a ‘points-based system’ that admits migrants based on points rather than because they have a job offer, and as proposed by Vote Leave and Boris Johnson.⁴³ Rather, we mean that having full control over immigration following our departure from the EU allows for more nuanced and transparent planning of immigration than under a system partially governed by Free Movement.
- Adopting a Sustainable Immigration Plan would have two key advantages over the Government’s current approach. First by making choices in the round, it would force ministers to confront trade-offs in the round – rather than the current piecemeal system. For example, it would force ministers to choose between lower-wage but skilled public sector workers, for example nurses and teachers, and higher-wage, private sector roles, like consultants or IT workers, within an overall “envelope” of net migration.
- It would also be transparent and accountable: ministers would set out what they are trying to do, and how well they are managing that. If, for example, a Government announced only measures that increase net migration with no compensating reductions, that would be clear for everyone to see. This detailed approach would importantly force government to consider trade offs between different types of immigration, according to skill level, between occupation and even between economic and humanitarian routes.

- This would provide an early opportunity to say how the Government plans to reduce low – and medium-skilled migration in particular. Here, there has been clear evidence of negative impact for the bottom end of the labour market for some years, but only limited action due to continued EU membership. In 2014, the Migration Advisory Committee stated that “studies suggest that migration provides a modest boost towards the top of the pay distribution and downward pressure on the wages of the low paid”.⁴⁴ In 2015, the Bank of England found that “the biggest impact of immigration on wages is within the semi/unskilled services occupational group”, estimating that “a 10 percentage point increase in the proportion of immigrants working in the sector would have been associated with a 1.88% reduction in pay”.⁴⁵
- This is particularly acute for EU migration, where ministers will shortly regain control. In 2018, the Migration Advisory Committee estimated that “between 1993 and 2017 the implied total effect on UK-born nominal wages of EU immigration is of the order of a 5.2 per cent reduction to the 5th percentile a 4.9 per cent reduction at the 10th percentile” – suggesting that the lowest paid workers have experienced a 5% pay cut due to migration over the period.⁴⁶ While the recent Immigration White Paper set out a clear commitment to reduce low-skilled migration through Tier 2, it also noted that “this is not to say that there will be no migrants in the UK undertaking low skilled work. Dependants of skilled workers; students; refugees; those coming on a family visa; or a youth mobility visa; are all allowed to work in the UK”. The Government has also committed to a pilot seasonal agricultural workers scheme and lowered the skills threshold for workers in the new skilled route to include some medium-skilled workers, both of which will increase low – and medium-skilled migration.⁴⁷ If businesses and public services are to reduce their reliance on low-skilled labour, especially from the EU, they will need clear and consistent plans from Government, set out in an accountable and transparent way.
- There will be those who argue that abolishing the net migration target will lead to relaxation of pressure across Whitehall and encourage even greater lobbying for special treatment. Immigration policy rightly requires ministers to make clear trade-offs between fruit-pickers, construction workers, nurses and doctors, given limited resources and public appetite. There is a risk of this, and anyone who has worked in the Home Office understands the extraordinary pressure from both other departments and industry groups for higher levels of migration. If the Government wanted to mitigate this risk without the use of a hard target, ministers could frame the Sustainable Immigration Plan with the equivalent of fiscal rules. For example, the Government could target year-on-year falls in net migration throughout the forecast, with low-skilled migration falling faster and high-skilled migration rising in relative terms to align with the needs of an industrial strategy. This would avoid the Sustainable Immigration Plan becoming an annual exercise in managing the migration demands of departments and business, and make clear that trade offs need to be made within an overarching envelope.

2. Present the Sustainable Immigration Plan to Parliament every year alongside the Budget

- The Sustainable Immigration Plan should be presented to Parliament in the same way as the Chancellor's plans for tax and spending. The Home Secretary should set out from the despatch box the Government's plans for immigration and the expected impacts on both immigration and emigration across different routes, skill levels and nationalities. The government should seek to make changes that affect migration at this point, ensuring tradeoffs are judged in the round – just as decisions over public spending are made at fiscal events.
- To ensure that all departments are held accountable for their immigration impact, these figures should be broken down for each government department, by inflow and outflow, and be updated annually. This would happen in the same way Budget documents set out each department's expenditure and income and account for in-year changes to departmental budgets. They should also show where possible the geographic impact of migration flows on different regions of the UK, to estimate the cumulative impact on different places.
- This would ensure that the Home Secretary is formally held accountable for the outcome of immigration policy on a regular basis – and forced to account for meeting or not meeting the Government's own forecasts for different kinds of migration. Importantly, given every department's policy impacts would be set out, it would ensure everyone around the Cabinet table is held accountable for their migration impact, whether a Justice Secretary's effectiveness in returning foreign prisoners or a Health Secretary's record in meeting NHS workforce training targets.
- It would make sense to align the timing of the Sustainable Immigration Plan with the Budget, given the two way-link between immigration and the economy and the fact that departments conduct workforce planning alongside Budget settlements.

3. Establish an Office for Migration Responsibility to independently assess departmental forecasts and government plans

- The Government should establish a new independent body, the Office for Migration Responsibility (OMR), to assess departmental forecasts and hold the Government accountable for its own plans. In 2011, following the financial crisis, George Osborne established the Office for Budget Responsibility as “a rod for [the Chancellor's] own back” on fiscal discipline. The OMR would serve a similar purpose – of keeping Ministers' honest about the impact of Government policies, and could be implemented today, irrespective of any future relationship with the EU.
- The OMR could be easily established by putting the Migration Advisory Committee on a statutory footing, making it independent of ministers for the first time. It would have a remit to examine and report on the sustainability of the net migration, by investigating the impact of government policies and wider trends through forecasting and long-term projections. This would

echo the Charter of Fiscal Responsibility enshrined by the Government in 2011 that established the OBR and deliver on the commitment made in the Government's post-Brexit immigration white paper for “an enhanced role for the Migration Advisory Committee” – with the possibility of “an annual report on key aspects of the UK's immigration system” and “change in its composition, status and remit”.⁴⁸

- The first task of the OMR should be to conduct a government-wide data collection exercise to better understand and map, at an aggregate level, the scale and nature of immigration by region, skill level and government department. Ministers are currently hampered by limited and incomplete information on migration patterns and routes, and the relative impact on public services: the OMR could usefully develop a baseline for future forecasts.

Case study: The Office for Budget Responsibility

The Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) is an Independent Financial Institution (IFI) that was set up in 2011 by the Chancellor George Osborne “to address past weaknesses in the credibility of economic and fiscal forecasting and, consequently, fiscal policy”.⁴⁹

One of the key aims of the OBR was to eradicate bias in economic forecasts, previously done by the Treasury. A number of independent reviews have shown it to be a successful model:

- A 2016 IMF review noted that there is a “lower degree of bias” under the OBR than under the Treasury forecasting regime.⁵⁰ An example of this has been that revenue forecasts have proven to be less optimistic under the OBR, while the degree of expenditure overspends has been broadly similar, resulting in a lower bias on fiscal balance projections.
- A 2014 external review said that the OBR had “succeeded in reducing the perception of bias in fiscal and economic forecasting”.⁵¹

The success of the OBR can also be measured in an international context. The Scope Index of Fiscal Institutions (SIFI), published by the European commission, puts the OBR at first in the ranking, with a score of 77/100. In the OECD's 2017 independence index, the OBR ranked first.⁵² The IMF concluded that the depth and breadth of the OBR's economic and fiscal analysis “can be considered as best practice, and could be used as a benchmark by other advanced countries”.⁵³ Similarly, Paul Johnson of the IFS has said “the OBR [plays] its assigned role in keeping the numbers honest”.⁵⁴

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- Onward’s proposals are qualitatively different from other versions of an OMR put forward. For example, London First have argued that the Government should replace the Migration Advisory Committee with an OMR to create an “official independent migration agency... to ensure the immigration system is working in the interests of the UK in the short to long term, ensuring policy supports business and economic need, and that operational processes are efficient and effective”.⁵⁵ This sounds like a proposal to take decisions about migration out of the hands of elected politicians and into the hands of a businesses and civil servants. It is hard not to see this as a recipe for further loss of trust and legitimacy.
- It also differs from British Future’s proposal for a national listening exercise on migration, to feed into three-year plans announced on an Annual Migration Day.⁵⁶ These proposals would increase rather than reduce immigration and weaken accountability for politicians in delivering their promises. A listening exercise, for example, would create even more opportunities for vested interests to argue for *increasing* net migration, on top of vociferous lobbying at present, and further excuses for non-Home Office departments to obfuscate their migration impact. In this respect, it is perhaps instructive that the British Future’s national conversation on migration failed to ask people whether they wanted more or less immigration overall.
- The proposals set out in this report are based on the premise that rebuilding trust and legitimacy in this policy area can only come from consistently delivering on promises made, or being held to account for failing to do so. We cannot build trust by continually finding new reasons to change our policy ambition; we must set out our plans and be held to account for them.

Table 2: Summary of changes

Current system	New system
<i>Overall aim</i>	
Net migration in the 10,000s	Multi year immigration plan
High-level target	Specific levels across immigration routes
No timetable	Time specific
<i>Implementation</i>	
Ad hoc announcements	Annual statement
No consideration of tradeoffs	Decisions made in the round
No buy-in from across Whitehall	Report on all departments’ contribution
<i>Oversight</i>	
Migration Advisory Committee	Office of Migration Responsibility
Non-statutory	Statutory independence

Conclusion



The problem with immigration policy is not necessarily that net migration is too high or too low – although clearly there is a divide between public opinion and political outcomes. The problem is that the gap between political promises and the lived reality of citizens has grown considerably.

We need to restore accountability in immigration. Replacing the net migration target with an independently monitored multi-year sustainable immigration plan would form the basis of a system that could command wide public support. It would be clear, with the government setting out each year for a number of years how many people it would expect to come for each visa route.

It would be predictable, with a multi-year approach allowing businesses and the public sector to plan accordingly. It would be credible, with proper oversight by an independent statutory body and (unlike the net migration target) be based on things the government does control.

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