

# **PUBLIC HOSTILITY TOWARDS IMMIGRATION: UNDERSTANDING THE CONTRADICTIONS**



# PUBLIC HOSTILITY TOWARDS IMMIGRATION: UNDERSTANDING THE CONTRADICTIONS

Labour's immigration white paper is clearly a response to growing public concern. But shifting public opinion on such a complex and emotive issue is not easy, especially when public opinion has so many - often contradictory - aspects. This paper, based on extensive Ipsos research, explores the contradictions within public opinion on immigration, examining the disconnect between perceptions and realities.

## Current public opinion on immigration

Most Britons oppose current immigration levels. An [Ipsos/British Future survey](#) conducted in summer 2024 revealed 55% wanted fewer immigrants, with 38% wanting a significant reduction. Half anticipated higher net migration within a year, rising to 61% among those already favouring decreased immigration. By April 2025, [Ipsos polling](#) showed 67% of Britons believed immigration was too high. Consequently, immigration has climbed the public agenda, ranking second only to economic worries in our latest [April Issues Index](#). This is a significant jump from its position outside the top ten in April 2022. At the same time, net migration to the UK fell by 20% from 906,000 in 2023 to 728,000 in 2024<sup>1</sup>.

## Views on specific immigrant groups

Despite this general opposition, most Britons hold more nuanced views. Only 14% wanted fewer immigrant doctors or nurses, 19% fewer seasonal fruit and vegetable pickers, and while 30% preferred admitting fewer students, just 19% supported a reduction in academics<sup>2</sup>. This shows the desire to reduce immigration isn't driven by animosity towards specific worker groups.

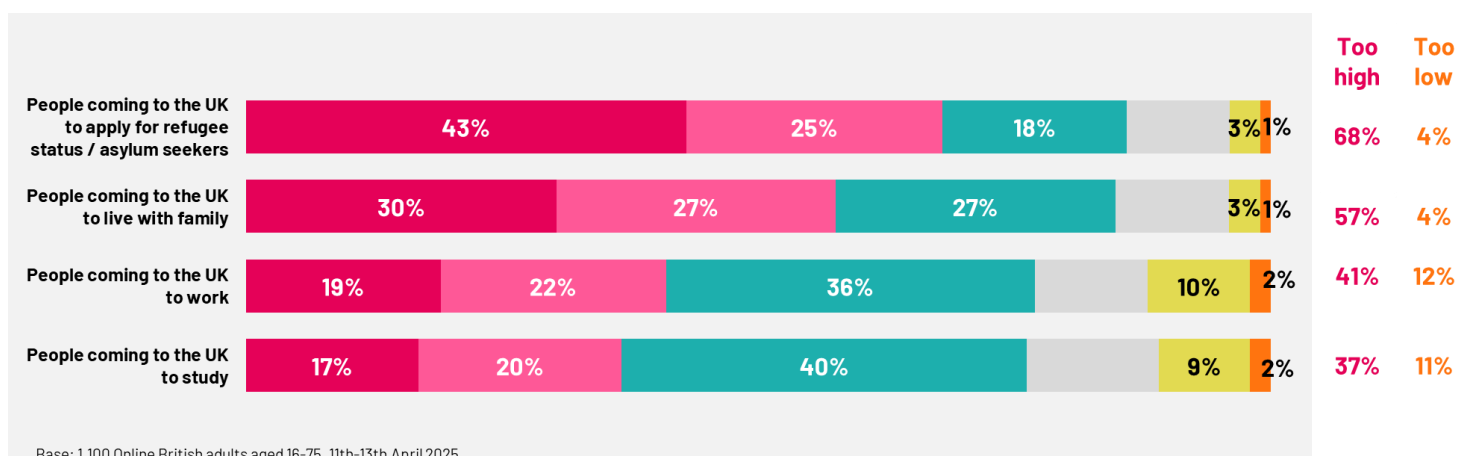
However, hostility towards asylum seekers significantly influences current public attitudes. When asked which group they associate with 'immigrants', 70% of British adults identified asylum seekers, exceeding workers or students. Negative perceptions of asylum seekers, often shaped by media narratives, perceived cultural differences and security concerns, are indiscriminately applied to all immigrants, even by those not inherently opposed to immigration. This is evident in Ipsos research: 68% think there are too many asylum seekers, compared to 41% for workers and 37% for students (Figure 1).

## Misperceptions and contradictions regarding refugees

A key driver of hostility towards asylum seekers – and, by extension, broader immigration – are doubts about refugees' sincerity, alongside concerns about their impact on public services, housing and crime. Ipsos' [World Refugee Day](#) research found 62% believe asylum seekers are economic migrants falsely claiming refugee status to take advantage of welfare services. Furthermore, many overestimate UK refugee intake compared to other countries: the UK's intake of asylum seekers is not disproportionately high compared to many other European nations. In the year ending June 2024, the UK ranked fifth in Europe for total asylum applications received, representing 8% of total applications across the EU+ and UK. When considering the number of asylum seekers relative to population size, the UK ranked 19<sup>th</sup> <sup>3</sup>.

**Figure 1: Public views towards different groups applying for refugee status**

Do you think the number of [...] is too high, too low or about right?



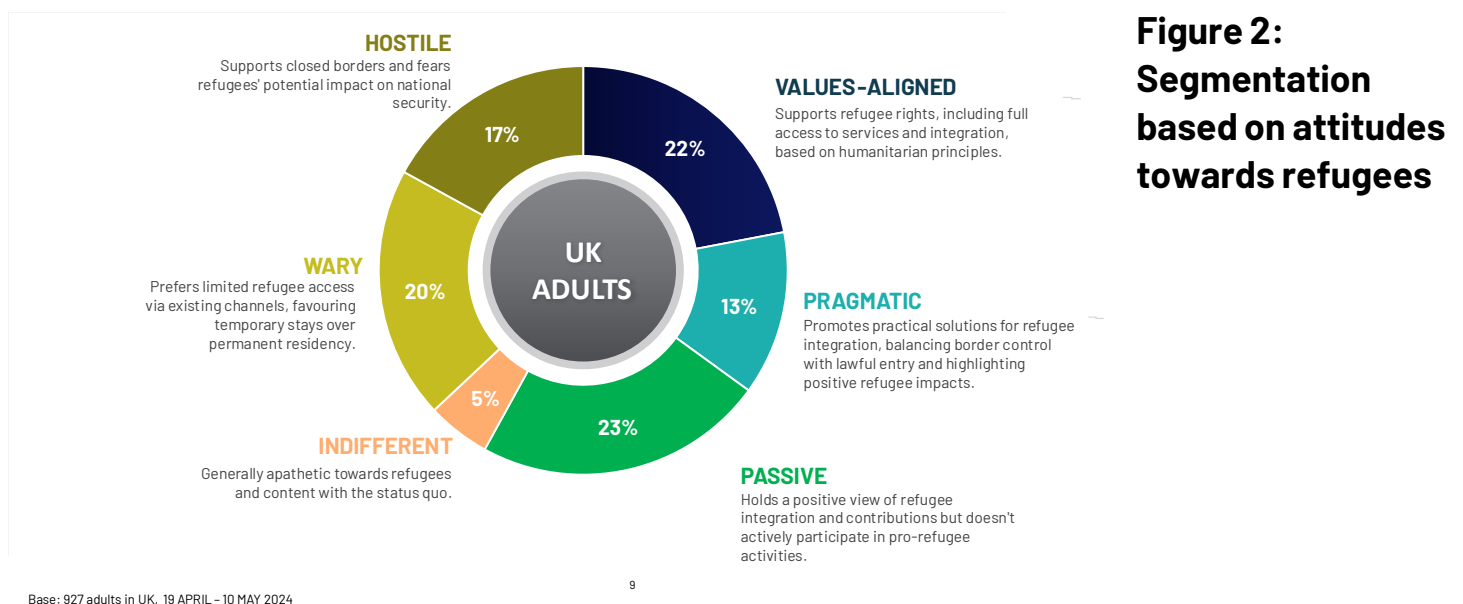
These misperceptions explain some of the contradictions in British public attitudes towards refugees. In April-May 2024, 75% agreed people should be able to take refuge in other countries, including the UK, to escape from war or persecution, yet 44% simultaneously supported closing borders to refugees entirely<sup>4</sup>. Many of those advocating border closure tend to believe that most refugees are “bogus” (88%) and that the UK takes more than its fair share. Yet, they are divided on whether most refugees will successfully integrate (45% think they will) and make a positive contribution to the UK (40% think they will). The perception of refugees as not genuine seems more influential than practical concerns, though the two are likely linked.

## Attitudinal segmentation

The importance of this belief (or disbelief) in the genuine nature of refugees is highlighted in Ipsos’ new attitudinal segmentation (Figure 2). While extreme groups hold fairly uniformly positive or

negative views on most metrics, middle groups, like the “pragmatic group” (approximately 13% of the population), show more complex views. While clearly believing in the principle of refuge (82%), positive contributions by refugees (85%), and successful integration (84%), they also support closing borders (58%). This again links back to a lack of trust in the motivations of refugees, with 87% of this group believing most refugees are ‘bogus’, compared to 81% of the most positive group who rejected this view.

The belief that many refugees are not genuine significantly fuels negative attitudes. However, changing views on such an emotive issue isn’t simply about correcting misinformation or negative stories on social media. For a start, most of the pragmatic group primarily trusts traditional media, not social media, for information about refugees, with political leaders and parties ranking lower. Furthermore, this group was not made up of a majority of Conservative or Reform UK supporters.



**Figure 2:**  
**Segmentation**  
**based on attitudes**  
**towards refugees**

## The psychology of public opinion

This highlights a deeper challenge: how people form and change political beliefs. Opinions are rarely formed solely through rational analysis of all the facts. Instead, we use mental shortcuts, relying on trusted sources and emotional responses alongside reasoning. Once we identify with a particular stance, it becomes a lens through which we process new information. This is evident in both “confirmation bias”, where we favour information supporting existing views<sup>5</sup>, and “motivated reasoning”, where trust in new information depends on our attitude towards its source<sup>6</sup>. Consequently, even accurate information can be disregarded if it contradicts established beliefs.

Furthermore, negative beliefs about immigration or refugees may not be the *cause* of hostility, but rather a *consequence*. Strongly held positions on both sides of the debate often involve rationalisations that are symptoms, not origins, of underlying beliefs. Negative preconceptions about immigrants or refugees may seem – even to the people holding these views – to justify hostility, but they might simply be expressions of it. Therefore, disproving specific concerns, like the impact on housing, may not reduce hostility and could even backfire by reinforcing perceptions of censorship and validating existing attitudes.

## Labour’s response to public anxieties

Recent global events have amplified the refugee crisis and increased the salience of migration as a contentious political issue worldwide, including in the UK. But hostility to refugees is

not solely a reaction to recent events; it has deep-seated social roots. A key driver of negative views is the belief that many asylum seekers are economic migrants falsely claiming refugee status to access welfare services, social housing and other public services at the expense of British citizens. Changing such ingrained beliefs requires more than simply presenting facts; it demands understanding of how people form and maintain their beliefs, which are often resistant to change, especially when tied to identity and values.

Labour’s immigration white paper focuses on broader immigration restrictions on legal immigration, such as raising skill thresholds for work visas and increasing the qualifying period for settlement. It has less focus on some of the wider public anxieties surrounding asylum seekers discussed in this paper, although they do announce that further measures on asylum in response to irregular and illegal migration are coming later in the year. However, recent announcements by Keir Starmer offer a glimpse into Labour’s developing asylum policy. He confirmed ongoing discussions with multiple countries regarding the establishment of “return hubs” for failed asylum seekers. This initiative has faced an immediate hurdle with Albania, a potential host country, declining to participate.

In the meantime, Labour needs to balance demands for greater control of migration against the risks of this strategy alienating voters who support skilled worker immigration, particularly for roles experiencing shortages (and concerns from business and university groups). Consequently, Labour may face criticism from across the political spectrum, caught between those advocating stricter immigration controls and those supporting a more compassionate approach to asylum.

## Technical notes

For the Immigration Tracker survey, Ipsos interviewed 3,000 GB adults online on 29 July–12 August 2024 on behalf of British Future with funding from Unbound Philanthropy and the Barrow Cadbury Trust. For the 2024 Ipsos World Refugee Day survey, Ipsos interviewed 1,000 UK adults aged 18–74, and 33,202 adults in 52 countries globally, online on 19 April–10 May 2024, on behalf of UNHCR. For the 2025 research, Ipsos interviewed a representative sample of 1,100 online British adults aged 18–75 between the 11th and 13th April 2025.

## References

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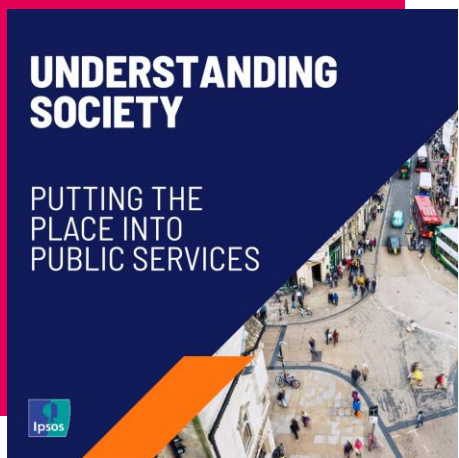
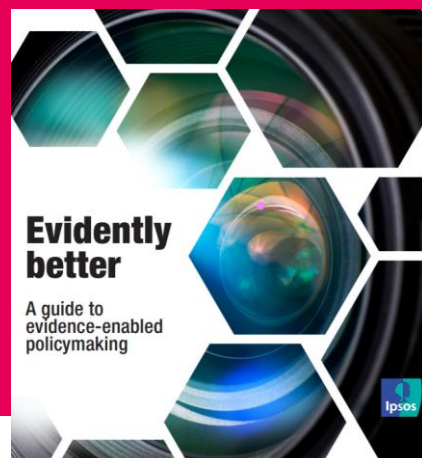
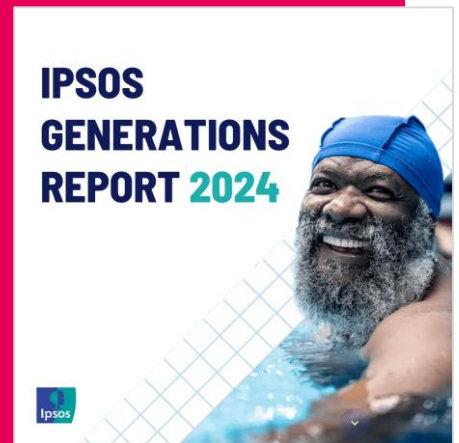
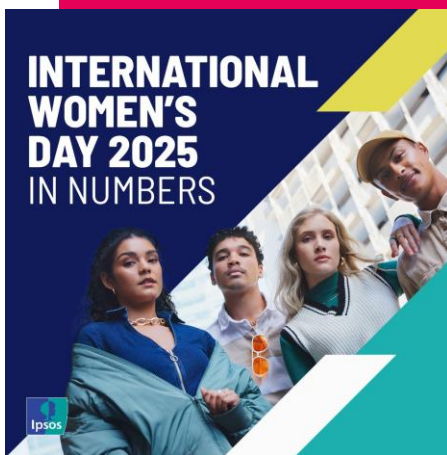
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