

The Brexit paradox: How leaving the EU led to more migration

SUMMARY

Migration flows have played a major role in how British citizens have viewed the European Union (EU) over the years. When net migration in the United Kingdom (UK) was minimal, few people prioritised it, and EU membership was generally seen as a positive thing.

The narrative changed with the increase in migration because of EU enlargement in 2004 and 2008, which Eurosceptics seized upon to question the value of EU membership. This resulted in the shock outcome of the 2016 Brexit referendum, leading the UK to leave the EU. The free movement of people between the EU and the UK ended on 1 January 2021, with the conclusion of the transitional period outlined in the withdrawal agreement signed in January 2020.

Leaving the EU in 2016 allowed the UK to implement a points-based system that treats EU citizens and non-EU citizens equally. In the following years, there was a significant increase in the number of migrants arriving in the country. The sharp rise in the number of regular migrants can be attributed to the liberalisation of migration laws, making it easier for non-EU migrants to work in the UK, a campaign aimed at attracting more foreign students, and the high number of visas granted to people from Ukraine and Hong Kong on humanitarian grounds. Additionally, there has been a notable shift in the composition of these migrants in terms of age and nationality. Prior to 2016, most migrants came from the EU, but now most come from outside the EU.

The UK government has already implemented measures to reduce migration, resulting in fewer arrivals, although it is still attracting more migrants than before Brexit. However, predicting future migration flows is difficult, as much depends on external factors. Irregular migration has also significantly increased since the UK's departure from the EU. Currently, there is no agreement in place between the UK and the EU on the return of asylum applicants. While both the EU and the UK have their own migration and asylum systems, they have cooperated on various aspects of migration in an ad hoc manner. Both parties are eager to enhance cooperation on challenges posed by irregular migration, including combating people smuggling and improving information sharing to better manage migration at their external borders.



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Introduction

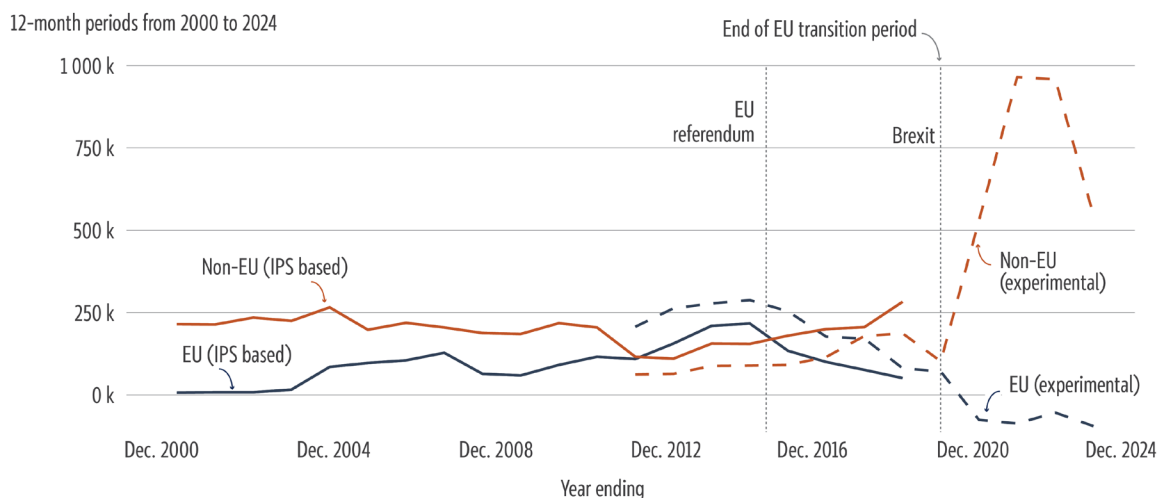
British citizens had many reasons to vote in favour of leaving the EU, according to [research](#). They believed that the EU was failing to deliver on various fronts, such as establishing a more prosperous economy and increasing security in the face of terrorism threats. They also felt that EU membership had diminished their control over migratory flows.

In the years leading up to the referendum, net migration from EU countries had significantly increased following the enlargements of 2004 and 2008. In 2000, net migration from EU countries was only 6 000, but by 2014 it had peaked at 282 400. [Concerns about the rise in migration](#) fuelled Euroscepticism, persuading then UK Prime Minister David Cameron to call the referendum.

Despite [concerns about migration](#) prompting many British citizens to vote in favour of the UK's withdrawal from the EU in the Brexit referendum in June 2016, the country has paradoxically attracted significantly more migrants since leaving. While net migration in the UK was [248 000 in 2016](#), it was provisionally estimated to be [431 000 in 2024](#) (although still less than the 860 000 the year before).

Since 2020, there has also been a noticeable increase in the number of irregular arrivals in the UK. In 2018, only 299 people were detected [crossing the English Channel in small boats](#), but by 2023 this number had risen to 29 437 (still less than the peak of 45 774 a year earlier). Additionally, [the number of asylum applications has significantly increased since 2020](#). It could be argued that leaving the EU has limited the UK's ability to tackle irregular migration, as it is no longer able to send migrants back to the EU country where they first arrived.

Figure 1: Estimates of net migration of EU and non-EU citizens in the United Kingdom



Note: Previous net migration estimates based on the International Passenger Survey (IPS) have known limitations, including undercounting some groups (e.g. international students) and inconsistencies with administrative data. More recently, the UK has changed to an experimental method of estimating the figures, based in particular on multiple administrative data sources. This is shown in the dashed line and is subject to future revision. All figures are rounded to the nearest thousand and may not sum exactly. EU figures include EEA and Swiss nationals. British citizens migrating are not included.

Data source: [UK Office for National Statistics](#), May 2025.

Figure 1 shows the evolution of net migration in the United Kingdom from 2000 to the end of 2024, excluding movements of British citizens. Broken down into EU citizens and non-EU citizens, the graphic illustrates how the pattern has changed for these two groups over the years. The referendum and the UK's withdrawal from the EU have been included to demonstrate the impact of these key events. NB: Note that the UK has changed the method for estimating the numbers during the period.

Background

Migration has shaped political debate in the EU and the UK for decades, but it has not always been a priority for British voters. In 1994, immigration was considered a concern by less than 5 % of British citizens. According to an analysis of [public opinion on migration](#), it was rarely mentioned until the 2000s. There was no indication of it becoming one of the main reasons for the UK to leave the EU decades later.

Migration rules before Brexit

While in the EU, the UK was already able to set [national immigration rules](#), including a points-based system for non-EU nationals. UK-based companies or organisations that wanted to employ someone from outside the EU needed to [sponsor](#) them.

Although EU citizens had the right to live and work in the UK without needing a visa, the country did have several opt-outs from EU legislation relating to migration and border checks.

The UK was not part of the Schengen area, so continued to be able to carry out border checks on anyone entering the country, including EU nationals.

The UK also had an opt-out from legislation in the area of freedom, security and justice under [Protocol 21 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union](#). This includes matters related to migration and asylum, although the UK retained the right to actively opt in to specific pieces of legislation.

Increased migration fuels Euroscepticism

Up until 2004, net migration from EU countries to the UK was negligible, as shown in an [analysis of EU migration to and from the UK](#) by the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford. In 2000, it stood at 6 000, rising to 15 000 by 2003. The EU's enlargement in 2004, when 10 new countries joined, was a turning point. The UK, along with Ireland and Sweden, were the only EU countries to open their borders to migrants from the then-new Member States without any restrictions. This decision led to a significant boost in migrants. Already in 2004, net migration from EU countries soared to 84 000. The other EU Member States decided to introduce transitional periods, which resulted in a phased approach to the free movement of people.

Another wave followed after 1 January 2014, once restrictions on the rights of Romanians and Bulgarians to work in the UK were lifted. By March 2016, net migration from EU countries had peaked at 282 400.

The UK Independence Party (UKIP), which had campaigned on leaving the EU since the 1990s, capitalised on growing concerns about migration to attract more voters. Although it never managed to secure more than two Members of Parliament (MPs) in the House of Commons, it proved more successful in local and European elections. This put pressure on the Conservative Party, prompting party leader David Cameron to make concessions to placate the Eurosceptic wing of his own party. In 2013, Cameron pledged to hold a referendum on EU membership, which finally took place in 2016. According to an [analysis of this decision](#), this was done at the request of Eurosceptic Tory MPs.

Importance of migration in the Brexit referendum

Concerns about migration played a decisive role in convincing British citizens to vote in favour of leaving the EU in the 2016 referendum. The Leave campaign used photos from that year's [migration crisis](#) for its publicity materials. In 2015 and 2016, more than one million people arrived in the EU, most of them fleeing war and terror in Syria and other countries. Although some of these people made their way to the UK, it processed fewer [asylum applications](#) than Germany, France, Italy, Sweden and Austria in 2015–2017.

A [poll](#) published a week before the referendum showed that participants viewed immigration and immigrants as the most significant issue facing Britain (48 %). This was a 10-percentage point increase from the previous month. Concerns about the EU and Europe ranked third at 32 %, the highest level since December 1999. This suggests that the impending referendum and the public debate surrounding it had had an impact on what British people considered important.

A [study](#) looking into the role of migration in the Brexit referendum concluded that strong public concerns over immigration and its perceived effects on the country and on communities were central to explaining the Brexit vote: 'Public support for leaving the EU was significantly stronger in local communities that had experienced higher rates of ethnic change in the period preceding the vote, underscoring how relatively sudden demographic shifts can trigger significant political reactions among voters.' A [survey](#) conducted on referendum day among 12 369 people after they had voted revealed that one third of Leave voters (33 %) said the main reason they had voted that way was because leaving 'offered the best chance for the UK to regain control over immigration and its own borders'.

Another [survey](#) that took place in the same month as the referendum found that 65 % of Leave voters saw EU immigration as having a negative impact on Britain, with only 19 % of Leave voters seeing it as having a positive impact. A [study on Brexit and public opinion](#) argued that the Brexit debate was characterised by widespread misconceptions. Researchers stated that political rhetoric and media coverage of migration had led to many misconceptions about the scale, nature and impact of EU migration: 'Large numbers of us think that EU immigration increases crime levels, reduces the quality of the NHS and increases unemployment among skilled workers – when the best available evidence shows none of those are true.'

Brexit's impact on British citizens wishing to live in the EU

The Brexit referendum and the UK's subsequent withdrawal also affected British citizens living in the EU or wishing to live there. In March 2016, three months before the referendum, [Migration Watch UK](#) estimated that 1.2 million British citizens were living in other EU countries, based on United Nations figures. Most British citizens resided in Spain (309 000), followed by Ireland (255 000), France (185 000) and Germany (103 000). A [report](#) by the UK Office for National Statistics from January 2017 stated that about 900 000 UK nationals were long-term residents of other EU countries.

Under the [EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement](#), UK citizens who had been living in an EU country before January 2021 were granted [the right to stay](#).

A study on [Brexit, uncertainty, and migration decisions](#) revealed that the referendum vote caused migration from the UK to the EU to increase by about 24 000 people per year from 2016 to 2019. Additionally, naturalisations of UK nationals across continental Europe increased by more than 600 %.

When looking at the [acquisition of citizenship across EU countries](#), citizens from the UK were not even listed among the top 28 countries in 2016. However, in 2017 the UK ranked ninth (with 15 504 acquired citizenships), eighth in 2018 (16 193), third in 2019 (29 842), ninth in 2020 (16 112) and 14th in 2021 (13 036). In 2022, the UK no longer featured among the top 28 countries whose citizens had applied for citizenship in an EU country.

Migration after the Brexit referendum but before withdrawal

Following the Brexit referendum, the British government announced its intention to leave the EU and started negotiations on its withdrawal. The resulting withdrawal agreement gave EU citizens already living in the UK and British citizens living in another EU country the right to remain. However, EU migrants arriving in the UK after 31 December 2020 would be subject to the country's new migration policy, except for citizens from the Republic of Ireland. Irish and British citizens would be free to live and work in either country.

During this period, net migration from EU countries steadily declined from 231 800 in the year ending March 2017 to 55 000 in the year ending March 2020.

Migration after Brexit

Legal migration to the UK after Brexit

Leaving the EU meant the UK could have a [points-based immigration system](#), treating EU citizens the same as those from the rest of the world. However, this does not apply to people from the Republic of Ireland, who continue to have the right to live and work in the UK. Various visas have been introduced, including visas for students, temporary workers, and skilled workers with a job offer, such as academics and researchers.

The points-based system gives priority to skilled work, although there are exceptions for social care and seasonal workers. This new system has made it more difficult for EU citizens to work in the UK, as there were previously no barriers to living and working in the country, such as needing a work permit or meeting a minimum salary requirement. On the other hand, the new system appears to make it [easier for non-EU citizens to enter the UK](#). Previously, non-EU citizens needed a graduate-level job paying at least £30 000 a year to work in the UK. The new system now requires jobs that demand A-level or equivalent education and pay at least £25 600 a year, with exceptions for seasonal workers and social care positions.

The UK has also reintroduced a post-study work visa, allowing international students to work for up to two years in the country after completing their studies and up to three years for doctoral students. This visa had existed in the UK before but was abolished in 2012 due to security concerns and perceived public opposition to immigration, according to a [study](#).

Although the UK left the EU on 31 January 2020, there was still a transition period until 31 December 2020.

The new points-based immigration system came into effect on 1 January 2021. In the years that followed, net migration into the UK increased to a peak of 906 000 in the year ending June 2023 before dropping to 728 000 in the year ending June 2024.

Professor Brian Bell, the chair of the UK government's independent Migration Advisory Committee, [called](#) the above rise in immigration 'the inevitable consequence of government policy'.

Changes to the new system have made it easier for non-EU citizens to come to the UK, including bringing their partners and children. The government has also made efforts to [attract more international students](#), allowing them initially to also bring dependents. In July 2024, Secretary of State for Education Bridget Phillipson [said](#): 'Be in no doubt: international students are welcome in the UK.' Additionally, the government was keen to tackle the shortage of staff in the social care sector.

The UK's Office for National Statistics [attributed](#) the increase primarily to high demand for workers in the health and care sector and an increase in the number of international students. Visas for health and care accounted for 86 % of long-term sponsored work visas granted and 54 % of all work visas granted to main applicants in 2022, according to [data from the British government](#).

UK universities have also been recruiting overseas students more actively. The opportunity to apply for a [graduate visa](#) and remain in the UK for up to two years after completing a Bachelor's degree, and up to three years after obtaining a Master's or PhD, has likely made the UK a more attractive destination for international students.

The UK government has also provided greater access to foreigners on [humanitarian grounds](#), such as Ukrainians fleeing the war in their country and [people from Hong Kong](#). The [Ukraine Scheme visas](#),

including the Ukraine Family, Sponsorship, and Extension Schemes, were introduced in 2022 in response to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. By 2024, nearly 35 000 out-of-country visas had been issued under the Ukraine Schemes. Between 31 January 2021 and the end of September 2024, [174 307 visas](#) were granted to British National (Overseas) status holders from Hong Kong.

According to an [analysis of post-Brexit migration](#), of the 606 000 net migrants who arrived in 2022, 39 % came to study, 25 % to work and 19 % for humanitarian reasons.

Another [analysis](#) looked at the total increase in visa grants from 2019 to 2022 and found that students and their family members accounted for 42 %, people fleeing Ukraine and Hong Kong for 35 % and those arriving to work for 24 %.

To reduce the number of migrants coming in, the UK government has updated the rules so that [international social care workers](#) can no longer bring their partners or children with them. Similarly, starting in January 2024, [international postgraduate students](#) can no longer bring their dependents unless they are enrolled in a research programme.

On 11 May 2025, the UK government announced [additional measures](#) to further restrict migration. According to the [white paper](#) setting out these measures, migrants will now be required to have lived in the UK for 10 years instead of five before they can apply for settlement, while adults accompanying foreign workers will need to pass an English language test. Additionally, care homes will no longer be able to recruit staff from abroad.

Future net migration will be difficult to predict as it will not only depend on policy changes but also on external circumstances. In the discussion regarding [projections](#) about how the UK population will increase from mid-2022 to mid-2032, the UK Office for National Statistics explained that its migration assumptions are not forecasts but are based on observed demographic trends.

Changes in the profile of the migrant population

Not only has legal migration significantly increased because of the new migration policies but the demographic profile of the migrant population has also changed. After the new rules entered into force, EU migration turned negative. Net migration from EU countries decreased to -21 000 in the year ending in March 2021, and this figure further declined to -51 000 in the year ending in December 2022.

Having left the EU, the UK has become a less attractive destination for EU migrants due to the new rules that make it more difficult to live and work there. Another factor could be the drop in the value of the pound, meaning that money earned in the UK would be worth less.

An [analysis by the Migration Observatory](#) shows that only 5 % of visas were granted to EU nationals in 2021-2023, and that EU nationals account for 53 % of those refused entry at the UK border. Additionally, enrolments by EU students have dropped by 53 %. After the UK left the EU, tuition fees increased significantly for EU citizens studying in the UK, as they were no longer eligible for home fee status. Prior to Brexit, undergraduate fees for EU students were a maximum of £9 250 a year. Post Brexit, they increased to between [£11 400 and £32 000](#) a year.

However, as the new migration rules treat all non-UK and non-Irish citizens the same, there has been a major increase in migrants from outside the EU.

EU-born migrants tend to be younger than migrants from outside the EU. The groups of individuals aged 16-24, 25-34 and 35-49 are larger for EU-born migrants compared to non-EU migrants. Additionally, compared to British citizens, EU-born migrants also have a larger share of individuals in the 25-34 and 35-49 age groups.

EU-born migrants are also less likely to live in London than non-EU migrants. According to an [overview of migrants in the UK labour market](#), they are more likely to be employed than non-EU migrants. When it comes to EU-born migrants, 86 % of men and 80 % of women are employed compared to 80 % of men and 65 % of women for non-EU migrants and 78 % of men and 73 % of women for UK citizens. Similarly, the unemployment rate for EU migrants (2.2 % for men and 3.4 % for women) was lower than for non-EU migrants (5.2 % for men and 6.1 % for women) or British citizens (3.7 % for men and 3.1 % for women) in 2022.

The UK no longer being a member of the EU could also mean that more migrants decide to stay in the country on a permanent basis. In his book 'How migration really works', sociologist and geographer Hein de Haas argues that Brexit could mean that more migrants decide to stay permanently as it has become more difficult to temporarily move back to their own country: 'As could have been predicted from previous experiences, Brexit has motivated many East Europeans not so much to go back as to stay put, thereby unintentionally stimulating permanent settlement according to the "once in, never out" principle.'

Asylum applications in the UK after Brexit

Since leaving the EU on 31 January 2020, the UK has seen a surge in asylum applications. According to [asylum statistics](#) compiled by the House of Commons, over the last three years, the number of asylum applications has been historically high. In 2024, there were 84 200 applications for asylum, the highest number since 2002, when there were 84 100 applications. Following that peak, numbers steadily decreased, reaching a 20-year low in 2010, with only 17 900. From 2011 to 2020, the number of applications remained fairly stable, with an average of 27 500 applications a year.

Now that the UK is outside the EU, it can no longer return asylum applicants to the first EU country of arrival as it could under the [Dublin Regulation](#), which ceased to apply on 1 January 2021.

Increase in irregular crossings of the English Channel

The number of people crossing the English Channel in small boats [has gone up significantly](#) since the UK left the EU. While in 2018 only 299 crossings had been reported, by 2023 their number had jumped to 29 437, peaking at 45 774 in 2022. In 2018, UK Home Secretary Sajid Javid [attributed](#) the increase in crossings in part to strengthened security, making it increasingly difficult for stowaways to illegally enter the country.

Of the people who arrived in small boats from 2018 to March 2024, [93 % applied for asylum](#). Of those who had received an initial decision by 31 March 2024, about three quarters were successful in their asylum bid.

[Prices for illegal crossings](#) are said to have dropped significantly due to smuggling networks becoming organised and professionalised. Before 2018, crossings allegedly cost €14 000, but in recent years their price has decreased to €1 000 to €1 500 depending on the nationality involved.

Moves towards EU cooperation

Since the EU and the UK parted ways, they have had their own migration and asylum systems. However, there has been some ad hoc cooperation on [various aspects of migration](#). Both parties have shown interest in working more closely together to tackle irregular migration.

Following a summit on 19 May 2025, the UK and the EU stressed their commitment to deepening cooperation on challenges posed by irregular migration. This includes taking action to tackle people smuggling and improving information sharing to better control and manage migration at their external borders. They also [announced](#) they would work towards a youth experience scheme to facilitate the participation of young people from the EU and the UK in various activities, such as work, studies, au-pairing, volunteering or simply travelling, for a limited period.

Conclusions

Although the UK's withdrawal from the EU has enabled the country to develop new migration policies, deliberate choices by its own government have led to a significant increase in net migration. Its new points-based system has made it much easier for non-EU citizens to come to work and study in the UK and, at least initially, bring their partners and children. Education and salary requirements have been lowered compared to the requirements set for non-EU citizens before the UK's withdrawal from the EU. The UK has also actively tried to attract more foreign students by allowing them to work in the country for two to three years. In the years after 2020, the UK has proved generous in allowing non-EU citizens to stay in the country on humanitarian grounds.

Part of the need to attract foreign workers is the labour shortage, particularly in the health and care sector. However, other options are available to the UK government to tackle this issue, such as offering higher salaries for these jobs so that more people already present in the country want to do them. Focusing on attracting labour from abroad is a choice, as it is not the only option.

This is not the first time that decisions by the UK government have led to a major increase in net migration. When 10 countries joined the EU, the UK government decided, unlike most EU countries, not to impose any restrictions, which resulted in a greater than expected influx of migrants.

The driver behind the significant increase in net migration therefore seems to be linked to many factors.

When it comes to tackling irregular migration, remaining in the EU could have made a difference as it would have allowed the UK to send back migrants to the EU country where they had first arrived.

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT RESOLUTIONS ON THE TOPIC

[Implementing and monitoring the provisions on citizens' rights in the Withdrawal Agreement](#) (2020)

[The outcome of EU-UK negotiations](#) (2021)

[Implementation of the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement](#) (2023)

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