

Looking beyond the headlines

Understanding the UK's Immigration White Paper

The government's immigration white paper outlines substantial reforms to the UK's immigration system, but are they really cause for concern for those looking to move to or remain in the country? And what should employers be thinking about when it comes to accessing international talent?

On 12 May 2025, the UK government released its immigration white paper, titled 'Restoring Control Over the Immigration System', outlining significant reforms. The Labour administration, led by Prime Minister Keir Starmer, aims to reduce net migration by 100,000 annually, by imposing stricter conditions for visa eligibility and shifting immigration access to a 'contribution-based' framework.

These immigration reforms have already led to significant public concern and media coverage. But while the changes have sparked alarm, it's important to note that these are currently only proposals and not yet confirmed policies, and as such are subject to change and not yet enacted by Parliament.

In addition, these proposals will require rule changes and, in some cases, new legislation. The legislative process means that these proposals may take a considerable amount of time to pass through Parliament, particularly as they are likely to be strongly debated. The exact date for their implementation (if confirmed) is therefore unknown, and certainly not imminent.



It is also important to note that previous governments have suggested equally radical changes over the years, some of which get “adjusted” in less media-seeking ways. For example, we have already had changes to salary thresholds and qualification requirements. Many of these changes come full-circle over time. Interestingly too, many policy changes are simply introduced without the need for primary legislation, and changes can and are made regularly and without making headline news.

Key changes proposed

1. Skilled Worker visa reforms

- **Qualification requirements:** the skill threshold for Skilled Worker visas is to be raised, restoring it from RQF Level 3 (A level equivalent) back to its pre-Brexit position, RQF level 6 (graduate level). This means that applicants will need to hold a university degree or equivalent to apply for a Skilled Worker visa. Roles below this skill level must be on the Temporary Shortage Occupation List, subject to sectoral review to qualify for sponsorship.
- **Salary threshold:** a new, higher salary threshold is proposed, with consultations ongoing.
- **Immigration Skills Charge:** this will increase by 32%, bringing it in line with inflation. Despite requests from business, there is no reinvestment or visibility of how ISC funds are used.
- **Immigration Salary List:** this is to be abolished and the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) is to undertake a review of salary requirements.
- **Domestic talent:** employers will be incentivised to invest in boosting domestic talent. Employers who fail to invest in skills training for the resident workforce may be restricted from sponsoring overseas workers.

2. Graduate Route Adjustments

- **Visa duration:** the Graduate visa will be reduced from two years to 18 months.
- **Dependants:** restrictions on bringing dependants during this period will be implemented.
- **High Potential Individual (HPI) route:** there is a proposal to expand the HPI route to allow graduates of world-leading overseas universities to work in the UK.

3. Social Care and lower skilled work

- **Care Worker visas:** new applications for care worker visas will be closed, though existing visa holders will benefit from transitional arrangements and may renew or switch visas during a transitional period.
- **Sponsorship for lower-skilled roles:** this will be time-limited, may be subject to a cap and will only be permitted for occupations where:
 - the MAC has advised it is justified
 - there have been long-term shortages
 - there is a workforce strategy in place
 - employers wanting to recruit from abroad are committed to increasing recruitment from the domestic workforce.



4. English Language

- **Language proficiency:** there will be increased English language requirements for all visa categories. Level B2 will be required for all main applicants and dependants must meet A1 and progress for settlement. Existing settlement language requirements would be increased across most immigration routes from level B1 to level B2 (Independent User).

5. Settlement, also known as Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR)

- **Time required to obtain ILR:** the time required to attain settled status will double from five to ten years. A fast-track route under a contribution-based model is being considered.
- **A shorter pathway to settlement:** this will remain for non-UK dependants of British citizens, maintaining a five year qualifying period provided compliance with established requirements is demonstrated, along with safeguards for vulnerable groups (including settlement rights for victims of domestic violence and abuse).

6. Citizenship

- Changes to the Citizenship process will mirror the new settlement pathway as outlined above.
- **Life in the UK test:** the current Life in the UK test will be reviewed and ‘refreshed’.

7. Family Route

- Requirements will be imposed so that incoming family migrants must demonstrate an appropriate level of English language proficiency.
- The financial requirements under Appendix FM will be extended to other dependant routes.
- Article 8 of the Human Rights Act (the right to a family and private life) discretion will be narrowed.
- Clarification will be made to the Article 8 rules to set out how they should apply in different immigration routes so that fewer cases are treated as “exceptional”, and to set out when and how a person can genuinely make a claim on the basis of “exceptional circumstances”.

8. Enforcement

- Visa revocation powers will be expanded to cover non-custodial convictions; and increased compliance activity is to be expected.



Conclusion

The white paper represents a significant shift in UK immigration policy, focusing on reducing net migration and prioritising high-skilled workers. While some sectors may benefit from streamlined processes, others, particularly in healthcare and education, may face challenges due to the proposed changes. The government's approach reflects a balance between controlling immigration and addressing sectoral needs, though its long-term impact remains to be seen.

Whilst the headlines may have suggested cause for concern, it is important to note that these proposals are not yet confirmed policies. There will be time for both employers and individuals to plan ahead as the proposed changes make their way through Parliament.

In a similar vein, there are various rumours relating to the introduction of a new investor visa encouraging investment into businesses in the UK with particular focus on AI, in exchange for residence in the UK. Various prototypes of such a scheme have been discussed at policy level for some time now, but again, these ideas have not progressed, and any form of investor visa is certainly not imminent. Currently the UK does not offer a wide variety of options, especially for wealthy individuals, but if you are considering relocating to the UK, we can help devise a strategy for you.

If you need tailored Immigration advice, our team of experts is here to help. We work with both employers and individuals across the whole spectrum of immigration needs, taking a pragmatic and sensitive approach to make the process as smooth and swift as possible. Get in touch with one of our team to find out how these latest announcements will impact you or your workforce.

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