

DEMOS

SETTLING UP

A NEW DEAL TO UNLOCK
IMMIGRATION REFORM
AND BUILD TRUST

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Aidan Garner and Miriam Levin

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

Demos is on a mission to upgrade democracy, to one powered by trusting relationships, civic and democratic participation, and information and technology.

We are in a democratic emergency, fuelled by the breakdown of relationships – those between state and citizen, between institutions and citizens and between citizens themselves. The ‘democratic doom loop’ of mistrust, disengagement and political ineffectiveness, inhibits government’s ability to deliver on its democratic promises, which in turn further damages trust in institutions. Our answer to this is a raft of tangible policy solutions that have the power to repair and reset those broken relationships; solutions that ladder up to a ‘new deal’.

This paper looks at these challenges and seeks opportunities to upgrade democracy through setting out a way to detoxify one of the most polarised policy issues of our time – immigration. It brings the public and policy makers together to understand where people are at when you get beyond the headlines and listen to the ‘silent centre ground’, away from the shouting from the extremes. Which in turn will lead to policy on immigration that can win public consent as a representative cross-section of the public has been involved in creating it. This is one strand of a programme of work on immigration that Demos is working on, including delivering deliberative workshops on the trade offs between economic growth and reducing net migration for the Home Affairs Select Committee, and developing and trialling a new model of MP-constituent engagement to open up local conversations about immigration.

It is a practical example of ‘**Everyday Democracy**’ – our pillar of work which aims to revitalise the practice of democracy through participation and deliberation, stronger civic habits and by tackling polarisation. It sets out a practical action that the government can take to build a new deal between state and citizen to help repair this broken relationship that is undermining democracy.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Immigration is one of the most politically charged and publicly divisive issues of the day. Public discourse is shaped by polarised framings and extreme positions, despite evidence suggesting that the bulk of the population hold more conditional and nuanced views.¹ This is taking place against a backdrop of declining trust in government, in political institutions and in the state's ability to manage immigration competently, fairly and transparently.^{2,3}

As a result, immigration policy is a lightning rod for public frustrations about political delivery and accountability. Public concern about immigration is not driven by numbers alone, but by perceptions of control, fairness and consistency, and – fundamentally – by a sense that decisions are removed from public priorities. The gap between how immigration policy is made and how it is understood by much of the public has widened, reinforcing mistrust and making it increasingly hard to win public consent for reforms.

The government's recent proposals represent some of the most significant changes to long-term immigration status in decades, notably lengthening routes to settlement and introducing a more explicitly "earned" or contribution-based system, as set out in *A Fairer Pathway to Settlement*.⁴ As public confidence in the government's ability to control immigration declines,⁵ this is a pivotal moment when the government could both seize the challenge of reforming immigration policy and directly address public distrust by actively involving them in shaping policy, opening up to discussion the values-laden issues at the heart of the immigration debate: about national identity, belonging, and social and cultural change.

Public attitudes towards immigration are more nuanced than headlines and political debate suggests. While immigration remains one of the most salient issues in British politics,⁶ most people hold conditional and context-dependent views:⁷ they value contribution,⁸ expect clear rules,^{9,10} want control over borders,¹¹ and care about integration outcomes.¹² They also recognise the economic and social benefits of migration.¹³

1 <https://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Noise-and-nuance.Immigration-Attitudes-Tracker-report-2025.pdf>

2 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2026/jan/10/two-thirds-of-uk-voters-wrongly-think-immigration-is-rising-poll-finds>

3 <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/44791-large-majority-britons-disapprove-governments-hand>

4 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/691edda450b16caf978153d8/Command_Paper_final_-_reviewed7.pdf

5 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2026/jan/10/two-thirds-of-uk-voters-wrongly-think-immigration-is-rising-poll-finds>

6 https://ygo-assets-websites-editorial-emea.yougov.net/documents/Results_Internal_YearPriorities_260105_w.pdf

7 <https://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Noise-and-nuance.Immigration-Attitudes-Tracker-report-2025.pdf>

8 <https://www.goodgrowthfoundation.co.uk/take-back-control>

9 <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/uk-public-opinion-toward-immigration-overall-attitudes-and-level-of-concern/>

10 <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/44791-large-majority-britons-disapprove-governments-hand>

11 <https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/latest-insights/public-opinion-on-government-asylum-reforms/#:~:text=Following%20the%20Home%20Secretary's%20announcements,Don't%20know>

12 <https://www.britishfuture.org/national-conversation-final-report/>

13 <https://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Final-report.National-Conversation.17.9.18.pdf?>

However, this “silent centreground” is often obscured by political narratives and media framings that benefit the louder and more extreme ends of the arguments – arguments that aren’t representative of the majority of the population.¹⁴ Polling data and conventional consultation exercises are blunt tools that simplify and flatten the nuance of public attitudes, where the reality is much more complex.

Settlement and citizenship policy encode deeply held public values about contribution, belonging, reciprocity, and social justice. They should not be treated as technical or administrative problems to be solved. Decisions about who qualifies for permanent status, on what terms, and after how long, are central to how immigration policy is understood and judged by the public. Settlement rules shape whether the system is seen as predictable or arbitrary, fair or unfair, and whether long-term outcomes are aligned with stated policy goals. Proceeding with major reforms to settlement and integration without meaningful public participation risks embedding contested assumptions about contribution and belonging into policy design, further eroding trust, deepening polarisation.

Settlement and integration mediate how immigration is experienced in practice, shaping the everyday realities through which public attitudes are formed. The economic impacts of immigration (both positive and negative) are often diffuse and contested, or seem disconnected from communities’ lived reality: patterns of settlement are felt locally and immediately through neighbourhood change, pressure on services, social interactions in shared spaces, and an evolved landscape of new languages, faiths, and cultures. These experiences play a significant role in how people interpret immigration policy as a whole. Involving the public in decisions about settlement and integration therefore offers not only a way to surface values and trade-offs, but a means of improving outcomes on the ground, ensuring that policy design responds to how immigration is actually encountered in daily life rather than how it is modelled in the aggregate.

Deliberative public participation processes are designed to address precisely the kinds of value-laden questions raised by immigration reform. They enable a broadly representative cross-section of the public to engage with evidence and experts, discuss with others with different views, values and experiences, and consider trade-offs. Facilitated discussions enable people to find common ground and reach considered collective conclusions. Evidence shows that such processes improve understanding, and surface more coherent and conditional public judgements,¹⁵ even on highly polarised issues.¹⁶

In this paper, we argue that the two fundamental but loosely defined concepts in the *Restoring control over the immigration system* white paper and *A Fairer Pathway to Settlement* – contribution and integration – can be resolved through meaningful public deliberation. This would allow the immigration policy that proceeds from these concepts to be built on firm foundations that have public buy-in and legitimacy.

Firstly, contribution: deliberation can help policymakers define what “contribution” should mean within an earned settlement system. Contribution is not a purely technical metric but a normative concept, encompassing economic activity, social participation, care, compliance, and civic engagement. Decisions about which forms of contribution count, how they should be measured, and how fairness should be assessed across different routes and circumstances are inherently political and cannot be resolved by expertise alone. Deliberation offers a credible way to test and legitimate these judgements.

14 <https://demos.co.uk/research/talking-to-ourselves/>

15 <https://academic.oup.com/book/27472>

16 <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1028&context=comm>

Secondly, integration: this paper also examines the role of deliberation in clarifying what “integration” means in practice. Integration remains weakly defined in UK policy despite being heavily relied upon to justify settlement conditions and broader immigration reforms. Integration is relational, reciprocal, and place-based – shaped by institutions, communities, and local dynamics as much as by individual behaviour. Deliberative processes can help articulate realistic expectations of newcomers, communities, and institutions, and bridge the gap between national benchmarks and local experience.

We argue for a new deal between state and citizens around the way immigration policy is developed and implemented. By working with people and communities, the public’s priorities and anxieties around immigration will be better understood and their preferences for how the system should work in practice can be encoded more effectively in policy. This way, contribution and integration bear legislative meanings that are recognisable in terms of people’s values and concerns.

Rather than integration being framed through a transactional lens, in which responsibility is placed predominantly on newcomers to the UK, we propose a new deal in which immigrants, communities, governments of all tiers, and civic institutions collectively build the conditions and shape the outcomes of successful integration.

A new deal between the state and those who live in it would reframe contribution around shared values and balanced public judgement, reflecting what people expect from each other and from the state.

In *Settling Up*, we make the case for putting public deliberation at the heart of how the government develops its immigration policy as an opportunity to reset its broken relationship with the public. It could ‘show by doing’ what a new deal between citizens and state could look like when the public are trusted to help navigate the complexities of one of the most polarising issues of the day, building policy that would have public consent as the people would have been meaningfully involved in shaping it. By giving trust, the government could earn trust – a fundamental building block to upgrade our democracy.

TABLE 1
HOW DELIBERATIVE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION CAN UNLOCK IMMIGRATION POLICY REFORM

POLICY MADE WITHOUT DELIBERATION	POLICY INFORMED BY DELIBERATIVE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION
Policy based on technocratic criteria, obscuring underlying value judgements	Surfaces and interrogates value judgements about contribution, fairness, and belonging within a dynamic model
Proceeds in a low-trust environment without securing public buy-in	Builds trust and legitimacy through visible public reasoning
Amplifies polarised and extreme positions, marginalising the most common, moderate views due to political narratives and media framings	Creates space for nuance and consensus-building by surfacing the views of the largest group of people who hold balanced, middle-ground views
Relies on polls and consultations that provide an oversimplified evidence base	Produces a much richer evidence base that explores complex trade offs through public reasoning
Applies weak or abstract definitions of integration, disconnected from lived experience and local nuances	Grounds integration policy in local contexts and based on what people actually feel ‘integration’ means

The paper sets out the following practical recommendations for government:

RECOMMENDATION 1

MAKE PUBLIC TRUST AND LEGITIMACY AN EXPLICIT OBJECTIVE OF SETTLEMENT AND INTEGRATION REFORM

Government should recognise that settlement and integration policy is not only about technocratic solutions and system performance, but also about public confidence. Building trust, clarity and legitimacy should be stated policy objectives alongside reducing net migration numbers or improving integration outcomes. This framing would align immigration reform with wider commitments to democratic renewal and public engagement.

RECOMMENDATION 2

COMMISSION A NATIONAL DELIBERATIVE PROCESS ON EARNED SETTLEMENT

The Home Office should commission national-level deliberative processes to inform the design of the earned settlement system. These should focus explicitly on value-laden questions such as:

- what forms of contribution should count towards settlement;
- how economic, social and civic contributions should be balanced;
- how fairness should be understood across different routes, sectors and life circumstances.

Participants should be broadly representative of the UK population, supported with balanced evidence, and given sufficient time to deliberate. Government should make clear in advance how the outputs will shape policy decisions.

RECOMMENDATION 3

PILOT PLACE-BASED DELIBERATIVE PROCESSES ON INTEGRATION AND COHESION

Public deliberation should be used to develop a clearer, shared understanding of what “integration” means in practice. This includes:

- reasonable expectations of newcomers (e.g. language learning, civic participation);
- reciprocal expectations of institutions, employers, local authorities and communities;
- how national benchmarks should interact with local variation.

Given that integration is experienced locally, the government should pilot deliberative processes in a small number of diverse localities, working with the leadership of appropriate geographies such as mayoral or combined authorities. These pilots could inform local integration strategies, test how national policy plays out in practice, and generate insights into how settlement and integration expectations vary across different places.

RECOMMENDATION 4

EMBED DELIBERATION WITHIN IMMIGRATION POLICYMAKING

Deliberative public engagement should be embedded as a routine component of policy making on immigration – across settlement and integration, and other aspects of contested immigration policy. This would position deliberation as a complement to existing tools such as impact assessments, consultations, and stakeholder engagement, particularly where policy decisions involve value-laden trade-offs and long-term social consequences.

Embedding deliberation in this way would help ensure that future reforms are informed by considered public judgement, reduce the risk of reactive or polarising policymaking, and create a more consistent approach to building public confidence in immigration policy. Over time, this would also build institutional capability within government to design, commission and use deliberative processes effectively.

INTRODUCTION

IMMIGRATION IS TOP OF THE POLICY AGENDA

Immigration is among the most consistently salient issues in British politics. The Ipsos Issues Index shows that immigration has regularly appeared among the public's top concerns since the mid-2000s.¹⁷ As of September 2025, most people in the UK (51%) name immigration as a concern, and roughly a quarter identify it as *the* most important issue – the highest levels since the run-up to the Brexit referendum in 2015.¹⁸ Throughout the year, it has been the single most frequently mentioned issue facing the country.

Likewise, YouGov's weekly tracker of "the most important issue facing the country" places immigration and asylum as the number one policy concern/priority of British voters in December 2025; in the 4 years since December 2021, immigration and asylum has occupied the top 3 issues 83% of the time.¹⁹ In early January 2026, when asked "What one issue, if any, do you think should be the government's biggest priority in 2026?", the public's top choice was "tackling immigration".²⁰

Much of the increase in the prominence of immigration as an issue has been attributed to sharp increases in net migration in recent years. From 2021 onwards, post-Brexit immigration rules led to unprecedented net migration numbers,²¹ reaching an annual peak of 944,000 in 2022–23, with around one and half million new arrivals to the UK that year.²²

Crucially, the salience of immigration is not only determined by the number of immigrants. The data shows a decrease in net migration numbers in recent years – to around 431,000 in 2023-24 and 204,000 in 2024-25,²³ reverting to roughly pre-Brexit levels. Yet the status of immigration as a public policy priority has only continued to increase.

Since Shabana Mahmood entered the Home Office on 5th September 2025, the government has adopted a tougher stance on tightening rules and reducing migration.²⁴ This can be seen in rhetoric and messaging – for example, launching a government TikTok account, *SecureBordersUK*, that posts deportation updates under the slogan "Restoring order and control to our borders",²⁵ and Mike Tapp MP (Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Migration and Citizenship) posting a deportation compilation on X with the caption "Deport. Deport. Deport. We don't want sexual offenders and violent criminals here"²⁶ – and in concrete

17 <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/public-concern-about-immigration-reaches-highest-level-decade>

18 <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/public-concern-about-immigration-reaches-highest-level-decade>

19 <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/society/trackers/the-most-important-issues-facing-the-country>

20 https://ygo-assets-websites-editorial-emea.yougov.net/documents/Results_Internal_YearPriorities_260105_w.pdf

21 https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/54C856A43B68B2F16D7F6FC02A1A3ED6/S0027950124000164a.pdf/div-class-title-unintended-consequences-the-changing-composition-of-immigration-to-the-united-kingdom-after-brexit-div.pdf?utm_source=consensus

22 <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn06077/#:~:text=Over%20the%20last%20twenty%2Dfive,ONS%20are%20undergoing%20a%20transformation.>

23 <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn06077/#:~:text=Over%20the%20last%20twenty%2Dfive,ONS%20are%20undergoing%20a%20transformation.>

24 <https://labour.org.uk/home-secretary-shabana-mahmood-at-labour-party-conference-2025/>

25 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2026/jan/13/home-office-tiktok-migrant-arrests-deportation-brutality-clickbait>

26 <https://x.com/MikeTappTweets/status/1984559042597986514?s=20>

policy proposals, such as stricter, Danish-style asylum rules,²⁷ and moving to an earned settlement system.²⁸

THE POLITICAL DEBATE IS DEEPLY POLARISED

Immigration policy debates are dominated by extreme language and polarised framings. Human rights and refugee groups have publicly criticised mainstream political leaders, including the Prime Minister, for using “demonising language”,²⁹ such as the infamous *Island of Strangers* speech, for which the Prime Minister has since expressed regret.³⁰

Analysis by the Runnymede Trust finds that hostile language – particularly equating migrants with “illegal” status – has become a defining characteristic of UK news media and parliamentary debates, reinforcing narratives of threat rather than balanced analysis.³¹ Research into anti-migrant narratives shows that terms calling for “remigration” have surged on social media.³²

Researchers at the University of Oxford,³³ and others^{34,35,36}, have shown that disproportionate media coverage can whip up more extreme ideas around migration in general – amplifying prejudices rather than informing considered judgements. Survey evidence indicates that patterns of newspaper readership are among the strongest predictors of public attitudes towards immigration; this is more true for immigration than in other high profile policy areas.³⁷

Recent anti-immigration protests around asylum accommodation and a marked uptick in far-right mobilisation demonstrate how immigration debates can become flash points for deeper grievances to be co-opted by malign forces. The 2024 summer riots, following the Southport murders, serve as an ugly reminder of how extremist narratives and mis/disinformation around immigration can manifest real violence. As Demos research has found, these riots were fueled by disinformation and extreme language about immigration on social media.³⁸

WIDER CONTEXT OF DISTRUST

This polarisation around immigration is occurring in the context of a profound and long-running decline in trust in politics, politicians, and political institutions. In Demos’s Trustwatch research from 2024, we found that endemically low trust holds a disturbing grip on British politics: in terms of trusting politicians and parties to be honest; trusting them to deliver and ‘get things done’; and trusting them to act in the public interest and in accordance with people’s concerns and priorities.^{39,40} Indeed, the Prime Minister has stated that “the fight for trust is the battle that defines our political era.”⁴¹

As of 2024, a record high of 45% “almost never” trust governments “to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party” (up from 34% in 2019);⁴² 76% report low

27 <https://www.ft.com/content/ffadd0ed-65cc-472e-956c-f28b7e41e74e>

28 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/691edda450b16caf978153d8/Command_Paper_final_-_reviewed7.pdf

29 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/apr/07/rights-groups-starmer-anti-migrant-rhetoric>

30 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cj3rxrg2pnjo>

31 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/jan/31/illegal-among-words-most-often-linked-to-migrants-in-uk-politics-report-finds>

32 https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/total-remigration-anti-migrant-narratives-targeting-the-uk

33 https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-09/European%20Convention%20on%20Human%20Rights%20and%20Immigration%20Control%20in%20the%20UK_4%20Sept%202025.pdf

34 <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/news/2025/media-coverage-of-small-boat-crossings-triggers-immediate-shift-in-uk-immigration-views-study-finds>

35 <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10967952/>

36 <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/app.20230300>

37 <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/perceptions-and-reality-ten-things-we-should-know-about-attitudes-to-immigration-in-the-uk/>

38 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Community-Disorder_2025_Policy-Brief_Online.pdf

39 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Trustwatch-2024_Report_October.pdf

40 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Trustwatch-2024_final.pdf

41 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/jul/17/starmer-counts-on-promises-he-can-fulfil-to-rebuild-voters-trust>

42 <https://natcen.ac.uk/publications/british-social-attitudes-41-five-years-unprecedented-challenges>

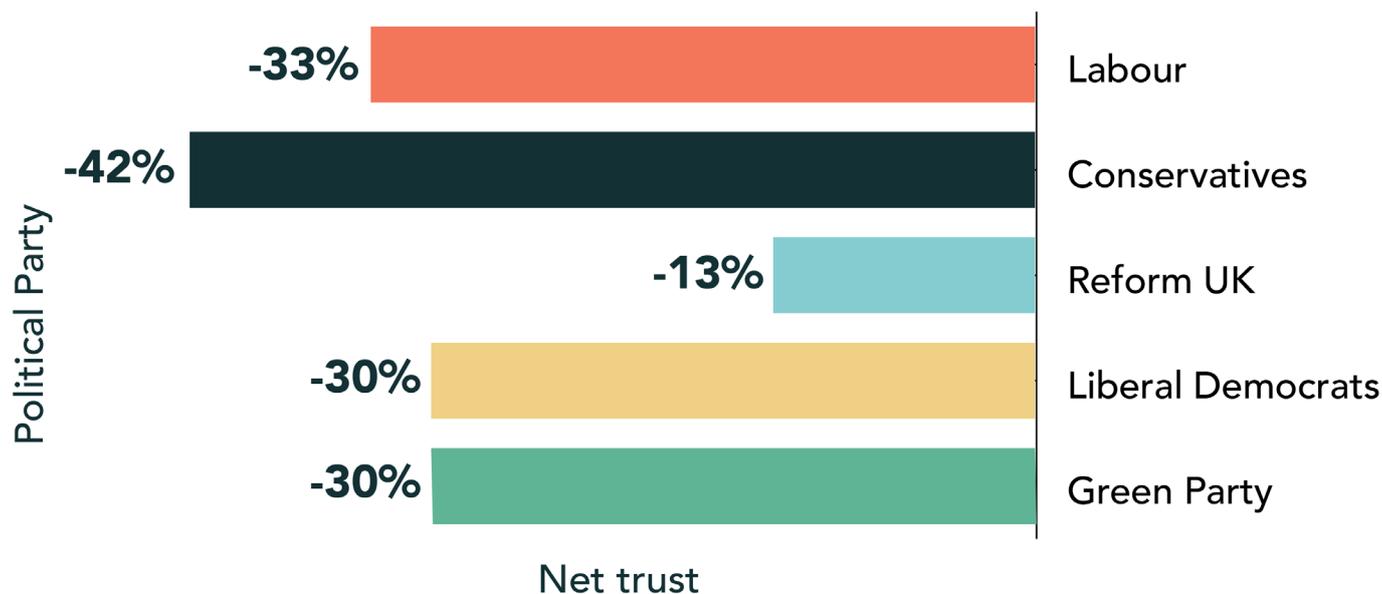
to no trust in Members of Parliament (up from 54% in 2014).⁴³ The OECD’s Government at a Glance 2025 report revealed that only 27% of people have high or moderately high trust in the national government – below the OECD average of 39%.⁴⁴

Carnegie UK’s Life in the UK 2025 study finds that 72% of people do not feel they can influence decisions affecting the UK.⁴⁵ This lack of perceived voice reflects a broader belief that decisions are taken elsewhere, by distant institutions, with limited accountability to the public. In May 2025, the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) connected this sense of political powerlessness directly to trust – defined as “people’s positive expectations that a political institution, system, or actor will do what they have said they will do or will act in the public interest” – explaining that declining trust is associated with reduced political participation and civic disengagement, it undermines confidence in government and institutions.⁴⁶

This disillusionment and distrust extends beyond individual parties and political figures to a wider scepticism towards political structures and institutions: Demos research found that just 32% of the population believe the UK is a well-functioning democracy;⁴⁷ other research reveals that 79% of the public believe the present system of governing Britain could be improved “quite a lot” or “a great deal” – indicating dissatisfaction not just with policy outcomes but more fundamentally with decision making structures themselves.⁴⁸

Immigration is an issue at the heart of this distrust, being emblematic of government failures to fulfil promises and seeming inability to deliver on public priorities. None of the major parties (nor party leaders) have positive public ratings on being trusted with immigration (Figure 1; Figure 2).⁴⁹ The same polling puts dissatisfaction with how the government is dealing with immigration at 56%.

FIGURE 1
NO MAJOR POLITICAL PARTY IS TRUSTED ON IMMIGRATION
Net trust to have the right immigration policies overall



43 <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/POST-PB-0066/POST-PB-0066.pdf>

44 https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/government-at-a-glance-2025-country-notes_da3361e1-en/united-kingdom_177c0766-en.html

45 <https://carnegieuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Carnegie-UK-Life-in-the-UK-2025.pdf>

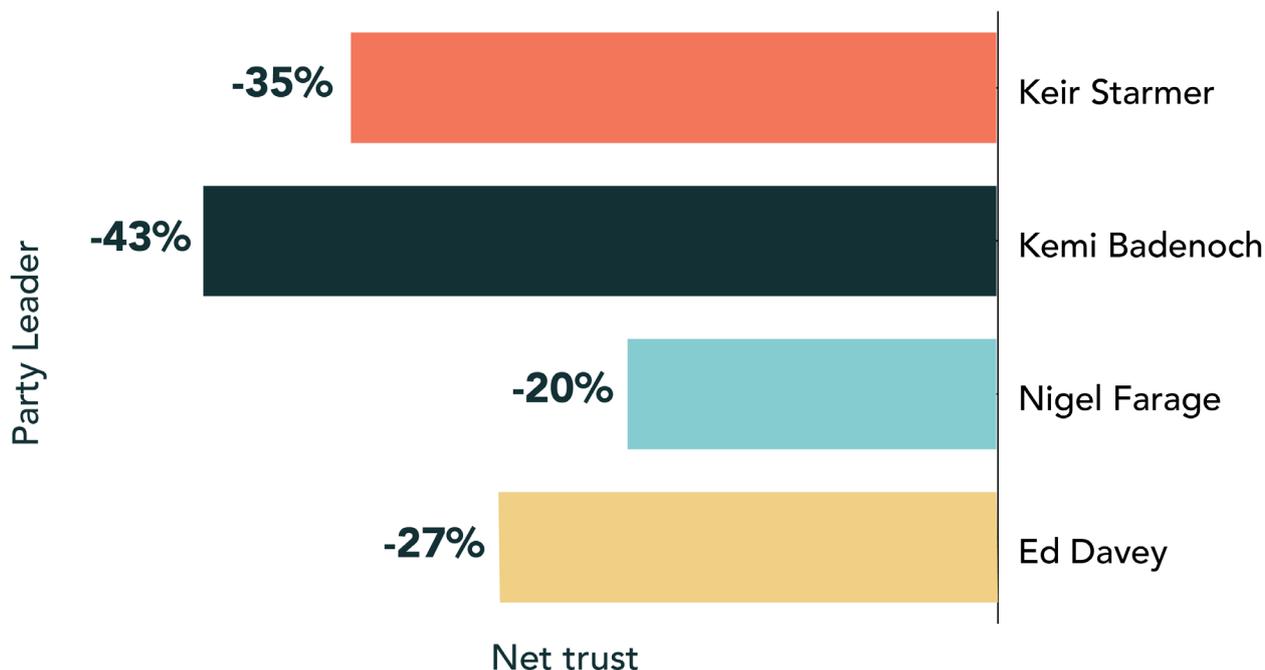
46 <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/POST-PB-0066/POST-PB-0066.pdf>

47 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Trustwatch-2024_final.pdf

48 <https://natcen.ac.uk/publications/british-social-attitudes-41-five-years-unprecedented-challenges>

49 <https://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Noise-and-nuance.Immigration-Attitudes-Tracker-report-2025.pdf>

FIGURE 2
NO MAJOR PARTY LEADER IS TRUSTED ON IMMIGRATION⁵⁰
Net trust when talking about immigration



The number of people who have little or no confidence in this government on immigration has risen to around three quarters of the population, while just 18% do have confidence and this is falling – with the most significant decrease (17%) coming from 2024 Labour voters.⁵¹

Settlement and integration reforms are therefore being enacted in a political and policy environment in which public trust is brutally low – in government and politics generally, and on immigration policy critically. The perceived legitimacy of settlement and integration reforms cannot be taken for granted.

Without this trust and sense of legitimacy in government policy making, democracy falters. We are in need of a reset in the relationship between citizen and state, and a new deal to repair the broken trust.

BUT POLARISATION AND DISTRUST ISN'T THE WHOLE PICTURE – THE PUBLIC HAVE NUANCED VIEWS

While the debate appears polarised, the bulk of the public appear to hold more moderate opinions. British Future’s *National Conversation on Immigration* (2018) found that most people are “balancers” who want immigration to be “controlled and fair”, value economic and civic contribution, and are concerned about enforcement, pressure on services and social cohesion, but are not fundamentally opposed to migration.⁵² In polling conducted for their research, 65% agreed that migrants bring valuable skills to the economy and public services, and 59% believed diversity is a good thing for British culture. As of 2025, polling finds that around half (49%) of the UK are balancers.⁵³

50 Polling was conducted during the Green Party’s leadership process, before Zack Polanski became leader.
 51 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2026/jan/10/two-thirds-of-uk-voters-wrongly-think-immigration-is-rising-poll-finds>
 52 <https://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Final-report.National-Conversation.17.9.18.pdf>
 53 <https://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Noise-and-nuance.Immigration-Attitudes-Tracker-report-2025.pdf>

In 2022, YouGov found that, when asked why they disapprove of the government's immigration record, the most cited reason (73%) is because the government is running the system in an incompetent or chaotic way – suggesting that dissatisfaction with immigration policy is driven as much by how migration is governed as by how much migration occurs.⁵⁴

The University of Oxford's Migration Observatory found that the British public is split almost equally between those who think immigration has been good and those who think it has been bad for the country, with attitudes varying sharply by migrant type (e.g. NHS workers vs irregular migrants) and by the perceived conditions attached to entry and stay.⁵⁵

Crucially, these more balanced positions are under-reported and ignored in much political and media discourse, which tends to reward emotive, adversarial narratives (e.g. on small boats,⁵⁶ border security,⁵⁷ mass deportations vs open borders) as they are easier to communicate and generate attention. Demos has previously analysed how the 'echo chamber' effect most strongly reinforces and encourages the sharing of opinions from those at the far ends of the spectrum, who are already more likely to share their views.⁵⁸

Political/media focus on highly visible issues such as small boats can distort perceptions relative to the scale of flows: analysis from the LSE⁵⁹ and Warwick University⁶⁰ shows how small-boat crossings have a "disproportionate impact" on immigration attitudes despite only making up around 5% of overall immigration into the UK.⁶¹

The Home Affairs Select Committee has explicitly made this point – contrasting the public's differentiated attitudes to different types of migration with "the binary and polarising way that the debate is often presented".⁶² The Migration Observatory similarly argues that standard polling frequently collapses immigration into a single, undefined category and rarely forces respondents to confront trade-offs or constraints; as a result, survey responses are often "top-of-mind", sensitive to recent news coverage and question wording, and can misrepresent what people conclude when they consider specific migrant categories or policy choices.⁶³

There is much more room for consensus and moderation than these narratives suggest. For mainstream policymakers, the challenge is now to address the public's legitimate concerns about inadequacies in the immigration system, but without reactively lurching to extreme measures which don't reflect the majority of the public's nuanced views.

54 <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/44791-large-majority-britons-disapprove-governments-hand>

55 <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/uk-public-opinion-toward-immigration-overall-attitudes-and-level-of-concern/>

56 <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/news/2025/media-coverage-of-small-boat-crossings-triggers-immediate-shift-in-uk-immigration-views-study-finds>

57 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2026/jan/13/home-office-tiktok-migrant-arrests-deportation-brutality-clickbait>

58 <https://demos.co.uk/research/talking-to-ourselves/>

59 <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/small-boat-crossings-have-a-disproportionate-impact-on-immigration-attitudes/>

60 https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/research/centres/cage/news/21-07-25-small_boats_big_waves_how_channel_crossings_are_shaping_attitudes_to_immigration

61 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c70989jrdweo>

62 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmhaff/500/500.pdf>

63 <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/primers/public-opinion-and-public-policy-complexities-of-the-democratic-mandate/>

THE POLICY MOMENT

THE CURRENT DIRECTION OF IMMIGRATION POLICY

CURRENT INDEFINITE LEAVE TO REMAIN AND SETTLEMENT POLICY

Settlement marks the point at which a person moves from temporary status – such as a work or study visa – to permanent residence, conferring lifelong rights including the ability to live, work, and study in the UK with no time limit and without conditions on access to public funds. It is also a prerequisite for naturalisation as a British citizen.

In most cases, this transition takes place through being granted Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) – the legal status that removes time limits and immigration conditions on a person's stay. Settlement and ILR are often treated as synonymous terms, with ILR functioning as the main route through which individuals become settled. Citizenship sits at the end of this pathway; changes to settlement routes and timelines reshapes who will ultimately be eligible to naturalise, on what terms, and after how long.

Currently, migrants seeking ILR must typically demonstrate five years of continuous lawful residence on a settlement route, sufficient English language ability, completion of the Life in the UK test, and compliance with immigration and criminal law.⁶⁴ While some route-specific requirements apply, progression to ILR is largely time-based once an individual is admitted on a pathway to settlement, giving government relatively limited scope to reassess integration or contribution beyond basic compliance.

This largely time-based settlement model is now under growing political strain as settlement volumes are rising sharply: Home Office statistics show that grants of settlement increased to 163,353 in the year ending June 2025, the highest level in over a decade, and 18% more than

⁶⁴ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/691edda450b16caf978153d8/Command_Paper_final_-_reviewed7.pdf

the previous year.⁶⁵ Official forecasts estimate that between 1.3 million and 2.2 million people could qualify for settlement between 2026 and 2030, with annual grants peaking between 359,000 and 620,000 in 2028.⁶⁶

This is not primarily the result of any recent changes to settlement policy, but the consequence of exceptionally high levels of legal migration in the early 2020s. Large cohorts who arrived between 2021 and 2023 are now moving through the system towards eligibility for permanent status under existing rules.

In political terms, this creates a perception gap: while governments can announce reductions in visas granted or net migration today, the number of people with settled status (and, as a corollary, citizenship) will continue to rise for years to come, even if entry routes have since been tightened. Decisions taken several years earlier about who could enter the UK are now feeding through mechanically into settlement outcomes, regardless of current political priorities or public sentiment. This makes settlement policy both immediately politically salient and structurally consequential over time.

As settlement volumes continue to rise, this lagged and largely automatic progression to settlement feeds into a narrative that immigration is out of control – since settlement numbers are increasing despite successive governments ostensibly working towards the opposite. In the year ending June 2025, despite net migration collapsing to under a third of the previous year, over two thirds of the public believe that it had increased.⁶⁷ While numbers are falling – and the government stressing this as a priority – only 16% expect net migration to be lower next year while 38% expect an increase, and 31% believe numbers will remain the same.⁶⁸

PROPOSED NEW MODEL OF EARNED SETTLEMENT

On 29 September 2025 the government announced a new earned settlement model as part of efforts to reduce net migration, improve integration, and strengthen public confidence in the immigration system. Speaking at the Labour Party Conference, the Home Secretary set out the core political logic of the reforms: that settlement should be something that is demonstrably earned through contribution.

Shabana Mahmood's Conference Speech – 29th September 2025:

"... We will soon increase the time in which someone must have lived in this country to earn "indefinite leave to remain" from five years to 10.

And we will be consulting on this change soon.

And as part of that consultation, I will be proposing a series of new tests, such as: being in work; making national insurance contributions; not taking a penny in benefits; learning English to a high standard; having no criminal record; and finally, that you have truly given back to your community, such as by volunteering your time to a local cause.

65 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-june-2025/how-many-people-are-granted-settlement-or-citizenship>

66 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/691edda450b16caf978153d8/Command_Paper_final_-_reviewed7.pdf

67 https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2026/jan/10/two-thirds-of-uk-voters-wrongly-think-immigration-is-rising-poll-finds?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

68 <https://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Noise-and-nuance.Immigration-Attitudes-Tracker-report-2025.pdf>

Without meeting these conditions, I do not believe your ability to stay in this country should be automatic.

Some will be able to earn an earlier settlement than 10 years, based on their contribution, while others will be forced to wait longer if they are not contributing enough.

In some cases, they will be barred from indefinite leave to remain entirely.”⁶⁹

On 20 November 2025 the formal consultation opened, proposing an increase in the standard qualifying period for settlement from five years to a new baseline of ten years for most migrants but with time adjustments: the route to can be accelerated for those judged to have made sufficient contribution, and extended for those who have met negative criteria – such as breaches of immigration law or being in receipt of state benefits.⁷⁰

Taken together, the shift towards earned settlement represents major reorientation of the UK’s approach to long-term immigration status – described as the “biggest overhaul of legal migration model in 50 years” by the former Chair of the International Bar Association (IBA) Immigration and Nationality Law Committee.⁷¹

The consultation outlines the four pillars that will be used to guide the measurement of whether an individual has made a “meaningful contribution to UK society”:

- 1. Character** – *This reformed system will, as now, provide for the refusal of application where core requirements relating to their character and conduct (including criminal record, compliance with immigration requirements and considerations pertaining to the public good) are met. It will be mandatory to meet such requirements, and there will be no ability to trade with other considerations to determine the qualifying period. We will conduct a root and branch review of the criminality thresholds that apply across all immigration routes. Our expectation is that you should not be able to settle with a criminal record. Revised thresholds will be set out in due course.*
- 2. Integration** – *The reformed system will ensure that applicants demonstrate meaningful engagement with British society.*
- 3. Contribution** – *The reformed system will reward individuals who have made a sustained and measurable economic contribution to the UK, on the principle that an accelerated path to settlement should be earned through active participation in the Economy.*
- 4. Residence** – *The reformed system will recognise lawful, continuous residence in the UK. Individuals will not, however, normally qualify on the basis of residence alone.⁷²*

69 <https://labourlist.org/2025/09/labour-conference-home-secretary-shabana-mahmood-conference-speech-in-full/>

70 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/691edda450b16caf978153d8/Command_Paper_final_-_reviewed7.pdf

71 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/biggest-overhaul-of-legal-migration-model-in-50-years-announced>

72 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/691edda450b16caf978153d8/Command_Paper_final_-_reviewed7.pdf

Within these pillars, the document sets out some proposals for attributes and their respective adjustment to the baseline qualifying periods should they apply to a given migrant. Table 2 outlines some examples that are up for consultation.

TABLE 2
 EXAMPLES OF ATTRIBUTES AND THEIR RESPECTIVE ADJUSTMENTS TO BASELINE QUALIFYING PERIODS THAT ARE UP FOR CONSULTATION

ATTRIBUTE	ADJUSTMENT TO BASELINE QUALIFYING PERIODS
Applicant has earned a taxable income of £125,140 for 3 years immediately prior to applying for settlement	Minus 7 years
Applicant has earned a taxable income of £50,270 for 3 years immediately prior to applying for settlement	Minus 5 years
Applicant has worked in the community (volunteering, etc)	Minus 3–5 years
Applicant has been in receipt of public funds for less than 12 months during route to settlement	Plus 5 years
Applicant has been in receipt of public funds for more than 12 months during route to settlement	Plus 10 years
Applicant arrived in the UK illegally e.g. via small boat/ clandestine	Plus up to 20 years

However, within the broad architecture of this model, several core elements are undefined or deferred:

- **Operationalising “contribution”:** Contribution will be measured beyond just economic terms (e.g. earnings, taxes, occupation), but it remains unclear how non-economic forms of contribution will be measured, including different types and scales of volunteering, civic participation, or sustained community engagement.
- **Who exercises judgement:** It is unspecified whether assessments will be conducted within the Home Office, delegated to an arm’s-length body, or handled by caseworkers exercising discretionary judgement.
- **Flexibility over time:** Contribution thresholds that are fixed too rigidly risk becoming misaligned with changing labour market needs and social expectations. The consultation does not yet elaborate on review or adjustment mechanisms.
- **Impact on different visa routes and dependents:** The Command Paper confirms that certain routes – including partners, parents and children of British citizens who hold that status throughout their qualifying period, as well as British Nationals (Overseas) from Hong Kong – will retain a quicker pathway to settlement, subject to mandatory requirements. However, beyond these specified groups, the consultation is open on how the earned settlement framework operates in practice in relation to rights for children, members of the armed forces, and victims of certain crimes.

INTEGRATION AND COHESION AS POLICY PRIORITIES

Notably, the reforms include that settlement timelines should account for integration, but a long-standing challenge remains: the UK lacks a clear, operationalised, and universally accepted definition of integration or cohesion. That absence continues to hinder consistent policymaking.

The last comprehensive framework for defining integration comes from the the Casey Review (2016),⁷³ which identified English-language acquisition, community mixing, equal opportunity, and shared civic values as key components of integration – while warning of persistent segregation and parallel lives in some communities. This review has never been formally implemented and, while the government does have dedicated teams working on integration and cohesion policy, they broadly operate in the absence of a set definition of what integration means, and therefore what the policies should be striving to create.

73 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a80c4fded915d74e6230579/The_Casey_Review_Report.pdf

RISKS AND CHALLENGES

POLARISATION NARRATIVES OBSCURES MAINSTREAM MODERATE VIEWS

Poll responses are highly sensitive to framing and salience effects, and only capture knee-jerk reactions. Even small changes to how a question is worded can change measured support for immigration policy. A YouGov survey experiment in the UK found that describing channel crossings as 'migrants arriving illegally' versus 'refugees arriving by sea' led to differences in support for the same removal policy.⁷⁴

Similarly, focus groups – while useful for testing out immediate emotional responses to policy positions, framings, wider political narratives – do not aim to and cannot reflect balanced, considered, and collectively shaped conclusions.

British Future and Ipsos Public Attitudes Tracker highlights the inconsistencies that emerge from polling data on immigration. Overall, the majority of the British public (57%) want to see lower levels of net migration (with only 21% believing numbers should remain roughly the same, and 15% supporting an increase); yet, when asked about specific occupations, public attitudes appear far more liberal (Figure 3).⁷⁵

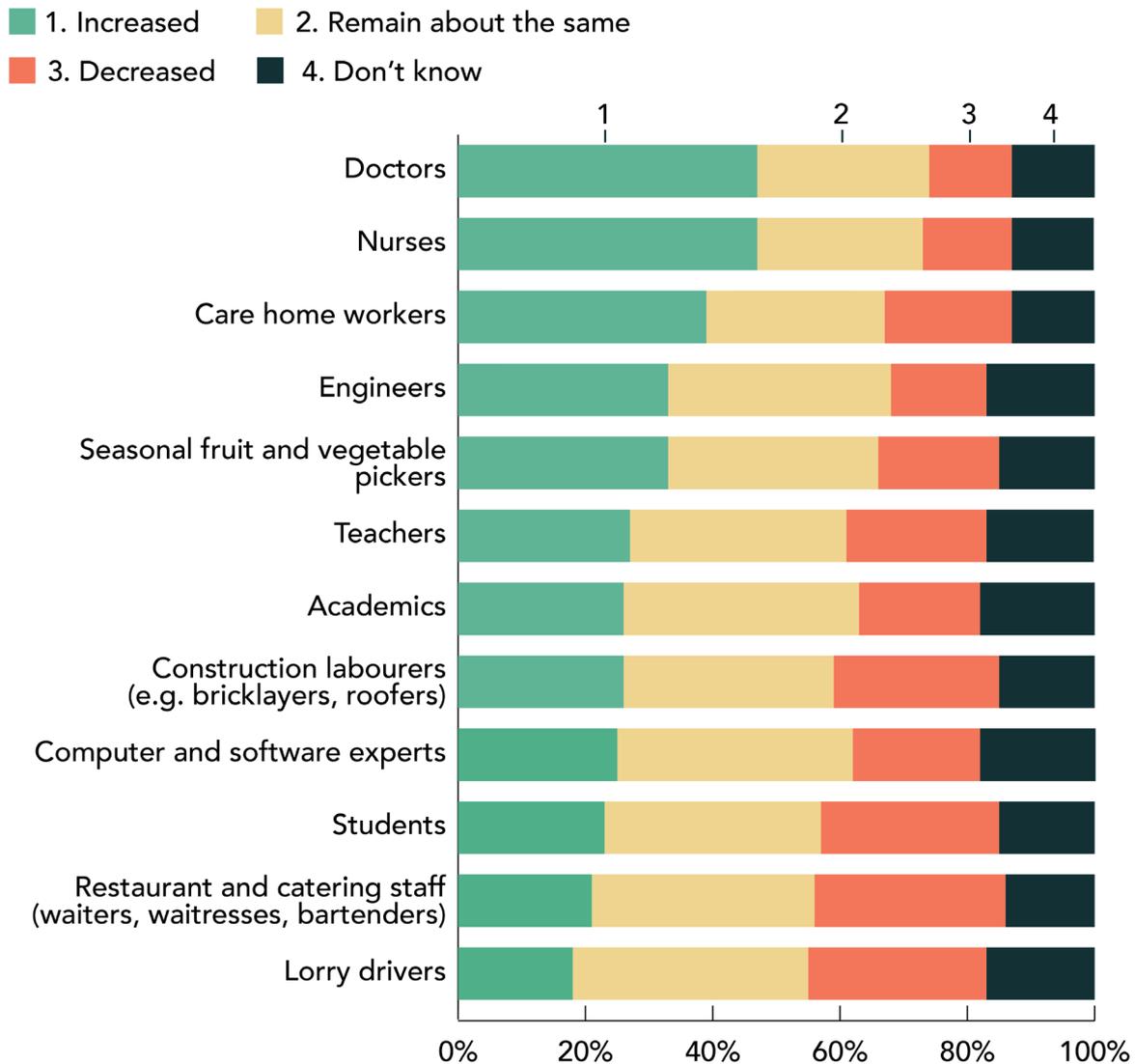
74 <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/45436-polling-question-wording-framing-migrants-refugees>

75 <https://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Noise-and-nuance.Immigration-Attitudes-Tracker-report-2025.pdf>

FIGURE 3

IN MANY SECTORS AND JOBS, THE PUBLIC WANT HIGHER IMMIGRATION

Proportion of people who think that immigration to these occupations should be increased, reduced, or remain the same



Collectively, migration to fill these roles makes up the majority of long-term immigration to the UK, but despite supporting increasing or maintaining numbers across each occupation, the British public simultaneously holds the contradictory view that overall numbers should be reduced.

THE WEAKNESS OF POLLING AND CONSULTATIONS TO UNDERPIN POLICY MAKING

This is a weakness of an overreliance on polling as an evidence base: one policymaker could use this data to justify a vast increase in net migration across several sectors, and be subsequently lambasted and punished electorally for apparently ignoring the public view that immigration is too high overall; another could reasonably enact policies to restrict and reduce overall migration, and simultaneously contradict the public's support for greater numbers of health and social care workers, engineers, teachers and academics, construction workers, and more. Polling outputs aren't false – just oversimplistic; it's therefore crucial to understand why these views are held so that policymaking can accurately reflect public opinion and align with their values, particularly in relation to trade offs.

Government consultation processes, meanwhile, tend to privilege highly engaged, organised stakeholders and vested interests, rather than reflecting broader public reasoning. The large group of citizens who hold more conditional, ambivalent or context-dependent views on immigration typically lack the incentive to participate and awareness of the consultation. They are neither mobilised by single-issue advocacy nor directly affected in ways that prompt submissions to a formal consultation. The government's own Consultation Principles implicitly recognise this by emphasising proportionality and targeted engagement rather than treating consultation responses as representative public opinion.⁷⁶

The result is an evidence gap at precisely the point government needs evidence most: reforms to settlement and integration depend on public acceptance, yet the bulk of the public, including those most likely to accept and sustain a workable compromise, are the least likely to have their views reflected in consultation evidence.

This matters acutely for settlement and integration reform. Unlike short-term migration controls, settlement decisions shape long-term membership, rights and obligations, and therefore require a large degree of passive consent and perceived fairness from the wider public. Policies that appear technically sound but are perceived by this middle group as arbitrary, overly harsh/generous, or insufficiently conditional risk generating quiet but widespread scepticism.

Without methods capable of eliciting how people reason through trade-offs – for example, how they balance economic contribution against social integration, or individual effort against structural constraint – policymakers lack reliable evidence on the very judgements their reforms seek to encode. As a result, governments are left with a distorted evidence base – rich in strongly held positions, but thin on the considered collective conclusions of the majority of the public.

SETTLEMENT POLICY CANNOT BE A TECHNOCRATIC SOLUTION

Public attitudes toward immigration are conditional: there is support for an approach to a settlement system that revolves around control and contribution.⁷⁷ Majorities support maintaining or even increasing migration for workers in key sectors (see Figure 3 above) and three fifths believe that migrants paying taxes should be eligible for citizenship after five years or less.⁷⁸ Moreover, while 74% of the public say they are very or fairly concerned about immigration, this drops significantly when migration is framed in terms of contributing their labour and their skills – reducing those *very concerned* about immigration by 18 points (from 40% to 22%) and *overall concern* by 12 points (67% to 55%) – with around two-thirds agreeing that skilled immigrants contribute positively to the country.⁷⁹

There is evidence that perceived contribution (employment, education, language) heavily shapes public support for naturalisation, indicating that the public intuitively already connects settlement and citizenship to normative ideas of contribution and deservingness.⁸⁰

At their core, the reforms raise questions about what the UK should reward, tolerate, and expect from those who seek permanent residence – and about how obligations should be shared between individuals, institutions, and communities. These are not questions of technical optimisation, but of public values. Addressing them credibly requires a process that allows those values to be surfaced, tested and reasoned through in public and with the public, rather than one that relies solely on expert consultation, technocratic input, or consultation that only reaches people with a specific interest.

76 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/consultation-principles-guidance>

77 <https://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Noise-and-nuance.Immigration-Attitudes-Tracker-report-2025.pdf>

78 <https://www.britishfuture.org/white-paper-attitudes-research/>

79 <https://www.goodgrowthfoundation.co.uk/take-back-control>

80 <https://academic.oup.com/esr/article/38/2/202/6350715>

While earned settlement evokes fairness, contribution, responsibility, and cohesion, the consultation and policy architecture translate these principles into a largely transactional and arithmetic model of eligibility. Changes to settlement and integration are operationalised through adjustments to qualifying periods, eligibility criteria, and compliance thresholds: years added or subtracted from an individual's settlement timeline based on specified behaviours, thresholds, and compliance criteria.

Complex and contested concepts such as "meaningful contribution" and "integration" are converted into technical inputs that risk flattening complex social judgments. The consultation sets out how time might be adjusted, but offers limited space for interrogating why certain forms of contribution should count, how they should be weighted, how fairness should be understood across different life circumstances, and how measurement of these criteria will change over time.

Adjusting the criteria and measurement of economic contribution over time is relatively simple and can be understood empirically, as they are based on numerical thresholds: the taxable income required to earn fast-tracked settlement can be recalibrated to be broadly in line with inflation and other economic measures. Whereas more nebulous criteria – such as integration, volunteering, and civic participation – are context-dependent and relational; there needs to be an understanding of the value judgements (the 'whys' and the 'hows') to build an earned settlement model that is sustainable over time.

INTEGRATION POLICY NEEDS TO REFLECT VALUES AND LOCAL EXPERIENCES

Integration is repeatedly invoked within a range of policy choices across settlement and citizenship policy (including the government's new earned settlement model),⁸¹ counter-extremism (e.g. the Prevent strategy),^{82,83} and local government funding (e.g. the Controlling Migration Fund)^{84,85} – yet it remains under-defined, inconsistently operationalised, and normatively loaded.

The Casey Review identifies integration as being central to long-term social cohesion and as poorly specified in practice, with fragmented responsibility and weak translation into locally meaningful action.⁸⁶ The Review notes that integration policy has often been reactive rather than strategic, driven by episodic national concern rather than grounded in local experience, and disconnected from the everyday realities of housing, schooling and employment that shape whether people feel part of a shared society. The government's own Indicators of Integration Framework similarly treats integration as multi-faceted rather than a single measurable outcome, underlining why it is difficult to reduce to one simple operational definition.⁸⁷

The Local Government Association has acknowledged that "local cohesion challenges vary considerably from place to place and links cohesion and integration to access to "education, jobs and housing", reinforcing that integration outcomes depend on place-specific socioeconomic structures rather than solely on individual choices.⁸⁸

People feel immigration – and thus integration – in tangible, personal experiences (e.g. cultural and linguistic changes in their area, pressures on housing and public services); national economic metrics bear little meaning to people if they don't feel the effects in their own lives.

81 <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6821f334ced319d02c906103/restoring-control-over-the-immigration-system-web-optimised.pdf>

82 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-strengthens-approach-to-counter-extremism>

83 <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7238/>

84 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c5c132a40f0b676ad16a6f8/Integrated_Communities_Strategy_Government_Response.pdf

85 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5b6d530fe5274a297659d94e/CMF_Prospectus_2018_-_2020.pdf

86 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a80c4fded915d74e6230579/The_Casey_Review_Report.pdf

87 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/home-office-indicators-of-integration-framework-2019>

88 <https://www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses/lga-response-casey-review-integration-december-2017>

Defining integration in the abstract – and building policy within that framing – will invariably fail to be congruent and relevant to people.

Integration is inherently relational and reciprocal, not something individuals can deliver alone – dependent on social connection within and between groups, and structural barriers shaped by language, culture and the local environment.⁸⁹ The Home Office states explicitly: “Integration is a two-way process” – incoming and settled communities, institutions, and government actors all share responsibility – and highlights “social bridges” between people of different backgrounds as essential to this two-way interaction at the heart of integration.⁹⁰

Framing integration primarily as an individual obligation on migrants – or as a test of compliance – obscures these dynamics. Language learning, for example, depends not only on motivation but on access to classes, stable employment and childcare; social contact depends on housing patterns, school composition, and labour market segmentation; civic participation depends on institutional openness and trust, not just willingness on the part of the individual.

Yet national integration discourse has tended to specify expectations of individuals far more clearly than expectations of institutions or communities. This imbalance risks producing policies that are perceived as moralising or punitive, rather than enabling and reciprocal – particularly when integration outcomes are shaped by structural factors beyond individual control.

Integration policy that explicitly puts fair expectations onto both communities and migrants, with resulting benefits for all around social cohesion, would be a more sustainable way to build policy and a better deal for all.

STRICTER SETTLEMENT RULES WILL HAVE ADVERSE EFFECTS ON INTEGRATION

The government’s immigration reforms are aimed at reducing the ability of migrants to stay in the UK for the long-term, but polling for British Future’s National Conversation on Immigration found that most people (61%) prefer migrants to commit to staying in Britain, putting down roots and integrating, while just 39% prefer migrants to work in the UK temporarily without putting down roots before returning to their country of origin.⁹¹

UCL Policy Lab has found evidence that acquiring settlement and citizenship tends to accelerate economic, social and political integration, and that barriers to citizenship can entrench marginalisation.⁹² Migrants themselves understand settlement and citizenship as a safeguard against precarity and deportation, and as recognition of their long-term stake in the receiving society.⁹³

The government’s settlement reforms are therefore concurrently pursuing two distinct, albeit interrelated, objectives through a strategy that creates conflicting outcomes: this policy framework is designed to manage the large cohorts who entered the UK in the immediate post-Brexit period by making settlement harder to obtain, encouraging some to leave who would previously have qualified, and limiting access to the full rights (such as access to public funds) that come with settlement; at the same time, the government is seeking to encourage deeper integration among those migrants the UK most wants to retain – particularly those judged to be making strong economic or civic contributions.

89 <https://eresearch.qmu.ac.uk/items/89e1ae5e-73c1-4c8f-aa89-786a088b5434>

90 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1074688/home-office-indicators-of-integration-framework-2019-horr109.pdf

91 <https://www.britishfuture.org/national-conversation-final-report/>

92 https://www.ucl.ac.uk/policy-lab/sites/policy_lab/files/ucl_policy_lab_brief_-_credible_evidence_on_the_impact_of_citizenship_acquisition.pdf

93 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1369183X.2025.2473619>

These are different policy objectives, yet they are being pursued through the same settlement architecture; the risk is that a single policy lever cannot credibly deliver both outcomes. In practice, policies that make settlement more difficult or conditional can weaken incentives to invest in language learning, community participation, and long-term social ties – the very behaviours that integration strategies seek to promote.

WITHOUT PUBLIC BUY IN, IMMIGRATION REFORM IS DOOMED TO FAIL

In December 2025, Keir Starmer argued that:

*“Unless responsible governments reflect their citizens’ concerns, populists will win. When trust in government to confront the challenges of today falters, our sense of shared belonging can begin to crack”.*⁹⁴

This outlines the political logic of the government’s approach to immigration policy: public attitudes and concerns have been ignored in immigration policy; this is severely damaging for policy legitimacy and public trust, and feeds into polarisation; it is imperative that the government listens to people on migration, and legislates and governs accordingly.

Explicitly, this has been framed as an antidote to populism – formulating policy that responds to real public priorities rather than dramatic political rhetoric – but immigration policies that rely on loosely defined concepts such as “meaningful contribution” and “integration” risks undermining confidence if those concepts are not clearly grounded in public values and expectations.

Across immigration, policy is vulnerable to being ineffective and furthering distrust when public judgement is absent. In this context, settlement and integration emerge as particularly important points of focus as decisions in these policy areas are experienced locally and over time, failures of legitimacy are felt acutely, but so too are opportunities to rebuild trust. As such, they provide a credible starting point for rebuilding trust in immigration governance, while reflecting a wider challenge and opportunity that extends across the system as a whole.

At the same time, the underlying challenge is not confined to settlement and integration alone. Many other areas of immigration policy are equally, if not more, contested and meaningfully involving the public would make a material difference to winning public consent. For example, policy around humanitarian re-settlement, asylum policy, or where and how to house asylum seekers.

⁹⁴ https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/dec/09/protect-borders-defend-democracies-echr-keir-starmer-mette-frederiksen?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_Other

HOW DELIBERATIVE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION CAN UNLOCK IMMIGRATION POLICY REFORM

Earned settlement and integration bring into focus many of the challenges that have made immigration policy difficult to reform: they involve concepts that are politically salient but loosely defined; they require judgements about fairness, obligation and reciprocity; and they shape how immigration is experienced in everyday life. These features make them especially well suited to deliberative public participation, where trade-offs can be explored in a structured way and insights can be translated relatively directly into policy design.

Many of these same characteristics are evident across immigration policy more broadly. Decisions about asylum, enforcement and compliance, visa rules, and border controls similarly rest on value-laden judgements, interact with local and institutional capacity, and are often publicly framed through simplified and polarised narratives rather than through direct engagement with evidence and considered judgements. In these areas too, policy is shaped under conditions of low trust and intense political pressure, and would benefit from approaches that surface public judgement and test assumptions more systematically.

In 2018, the Home Affairs Select Committee recommended

*“that the Government makes it a clear and stated objective of public policy to build greater consensus and trust on immigration. The work of British Future shows that there exists considerable appetite for greater public engagement and for this to be the basis for a constructive and open debate ... immigration does not have to be a polarising issue ... broader consensus can and should be found around the underlying principles of the immigration system, but the debate requires care, honesty and the opportunity for the public to be involved”.*⁹⁵

95 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmhaff/500/50011.htm>

In 2026, the Home Affairs Select Committee is partnering with Demos and King's College London to deliver a series of deliberative workshops across the country; "with the Government pledging to reduce inward migration and deliver economic growth, the sessions will explore the trade-offs that are involved in balancing the goal of reducing net migration with workforce needs of business and the public sector."⁹⁶

As explained by the Committee Chair, Dame Karen Bradley MP, these deliberations will involve "taking time to consider the many complex questions and trade-offs involved in making [immigration] policy and gaining a better understanding of people's views in different places and seeing where consensus can be found", and using the rich insights to inform the Committee's scrutiny of Government policy.⁹⁷

The government's earned settlement reforms are framed as the country taking firmer control of migration, responding to public priorities and concerns about migration. If the government is serious about breaking out of the well-trodden cycle of distrust and disappointment associated with immigration, involving the public in the policymaking process is an immense opportunity to communicate the evidence, rationale, and aims of policy, explicitly root policy change in public deliberation, and build trust in, and legitimacy of, a system that has public consent as it encodes their values from the beginning.

WHAT IS DELIBERATION?

One of the key methodologies used in participatory practices is deliberation, which seeks to reach considered, collective conclusions from the public on an issue. It differs from other qualitative research methods which explore individual top of mind reactions, such as polling, consultations or focus groups. The outputs should inform decision-making on the issue.

Deliberation involves:

- **Sharing a range of perspectives, evidence and information sources** – this means that participants learn about the issue and the various trade offs so are more able to contribute constructively to a discussion about it, particularly when it's a technical or complex topic.
- **Facilitated discussion between participants** – this means that participants are exposed to viewpoints and experiences they may not have previously considered, often leading to people changing their own views on a topic and even at times overcoming cognitive biases.⁹⁸
- **Identifying areas of consensus for decision-making** – this means that participants must find compromise with others to ensure the policy works not just for them but for others too, leading to more consideration of others' needs and increased empathy.⁹⁹

96 <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/9550/your-voice-on-immigration/news/211396/home-affairs-select-committee-to-hold-citizenassembly-style-events-on-immigration/>

97 <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/9550/your-voice-on-immigration/news/211396/home-affairs-select-committee-to-hold-citizenassembly-style-events-on-immigration/>

98 https://www.involve.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/docuemnt/Changing-Hats15-05-14_1_0.pdf

99 https://www.involve.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/docuemnt/Changing-Hats15-05-14_1_0.pdf

- **A broadly representative sample of the public** – stratified to reflect the demographics, geography, political views, and other relevant attitudes of the wider population. Participants are not self-selecting, mitigating the over-representation of highly engaged or interest-driven voices, and supporting the inclusion of those who would not usually engage in formal consultation processes to give a clearer account of mainstream public opinion.
- **Independent safeguards to ensure balance and neutrality** – deliberative processes should be overseen by an independent advisory group with balanced representation from different sides of the debate, who scrutinise question framing, evidence selection, and expert inputs. This ensures that no single ideological perspective or interest group dominates, and that competing viewpoints are presented fairly and transparently to the participants.



DELIBERATION TO EXPLORE COMPLEX VALUE-JUDGEMENTS AND TRADE-OFFS

Immigration is a values-heavy and multidimensional policy issue: public attitudes are shaped not only by views on numbers or economic impact, but by deeper concerns about fairness, control, reciprocity, belonging, and social and cultural change. If the government starts from the premise that settlement and integration reforms are value-laden, then it cannot treat contribution as a purely administrative metric. It is crucial to understand which forms of contribution the public values most, why, under what conditions, and how this can and should be measured. Including what is understood to be fair if retrospectively changing the terms for migrants who are already in the UK and have been progressing through a settlement route under existing rules.

Deliberative engagement can surface and interrogate those values, rather than relying on technocratic solutions that avoid the complex social realities of the issue.

A key strength of deliberative public participation is that it involves a broadly representative sample of the public rather than from self-selecting respondents. This means that policy makers can have confidence that the outputs are more likely to win broad public consent. The OECD's comparative review of representative deliberative processes emphasises that random/stratified recruitment is central to overcoming participation biases and generating outputs that can credibly inform value-laden policy trade-offs.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2020/06/innovative-citizen-participation-and-new-democratic-institutions_11aa2baf/339306da-en.pdf

Deliberative processes allow participants to interrogate evidence, hear competing perspectives, and reflect collectively on how different policy choices interact across sectors and outcomes. This produces more internally consistent judgements, as participants have to reconcile their support for specific forms of migration with broader concerns about overall levels, public services, labour markets, and social cohesion. Deliberation enables participants to move beyond top-of-the-mind responses and engage with the inherent trade-offs, complexities, and constraints that characterise immigration policymaking. It moves the question from 'what do you think?' to 'what should we do?', and it requires the participants, who have different views and experiences, to find common ground and reach an agreed, considered conclusion.

This is particularly important where policies are attempting to pursue multiple objectives at once – such as creating better integration outcomes for some groups, while making it harder for other groups to settle. A deliberative process can test how the public supports differentiating between groups, how far they are comfortable with trade-offs between control and integration, and what conditions would make a stricter system feel legitimate.

For the government, this is the practical payoff: deliberation generates a more reliable evidence base for policy design because it captures what a representative public concludes after engaging seriously with the trade-offs; this produces a rationale that is more legible and defensible as the government will have a clear democratic justification for their definition and measurement of contribution.

Deliberation doesn't replace usual policymaking methodology – rather, it compliments existing understandings of public attitudes (that are broadly surface level), and builds out the reasoning behind these views based on what is really important to people. Where polling reveals what people think at a given moment, deliberation reveals how those views are formed, how they change when tested against competing priorities, and which positions people consider fair and workable when asked to make collective judgements.

This power of deliberation to move policy debates away from simplistic narrative and produce nuanced outputs was demonstrated in King's College London 2018 Citizens' Jury on the UK points-based immigration system.

CASE STUDY

KING'S COLLEGE LONDON - CITIZENS' JURY ON THE UK POINTS-BASED IMMIGRATION SYSTEM^{101,102}

In 2018, King's College London convened a Citizens' Jury on the UK's points-based immigration system, bringing together a diverse group of citizens who deliberated over two days, supported by balanced briefing materials and evidence from experts.

Participants were asked to engage with concrete policy choices, including how points might be allocated, which skills or sectors should be prioritised, and how the system should balance economic needs with fairness and control. This moved discussion away from abstract preferences about overall migration levels towards practical questions of policy design and trade-offs.

Following exposure to balanced evidence, expert witnesses and facilitated structured discussion, jurors' positions shifted in two important ways.

First, views became less absolute: participants moved away from binary "too high / too low" framings and instead articulated conditions under which economic migration was acceptable or desirable, such as clearer contribution criteria, better workforce planning, and stronger integration support. Participants frequently reported that access to evidence and the opportunity to question experts challenged assumptions shaped by headlines or political rhetoric.

Second, despite starting from divergent perspectives, the jury reached a shared conclusion that the system required reform – not to radically restrict or open up vast increases in economic migration, but to work towards a fairer, more transparent model that better aligns with social and economic needs. Importantly, participants were able to reconcile support for lower headline migration with acceptance of targeted migration in sectors facing acute shortages, demonstrating a level of coherence that is typically lacking in the media representation of what the 'will of the people' is in relation to migration.

Crucially, the convergence was not achieved by suppressing disagreement, but by reframing the debate. Deliberation shifted discussion away from symbolic or emotive positions and towards practical questions of trade-offs, responsibility, and feasibility. Jurors acknowledged both the benefits of economic migration and the legitimacy of concerns about capacity, fairness and enforcement.

101 <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/research/citizens-jury-economic-migration>

102 <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/economic-migration-the-view-from-a-citizens-jury>

DELIBERATION TO HELP FRAME POLICIES TO WIN BROAD PUBLIC CONSENT

One critique of deliberation is that it involves a relatively small number of people – around 100 for a national-level process – and puts them in an artificial setting where they learn so much that they become like mini-policymakers. Politicians still prefer the bulk read of the country through polls that take the temperature of thousands of people.

This, however, misses a vital role that deliberation can play in the process of selling a policy to the country. A critical part of a deliberative process is to ask the participants how they would frame their policy recommendations in a way that would make sense to their friends and family. This allows policy makers to hear what message frames would work for ordinary members of the public.

Following this, national level polling on both the deliberated recommendations and the agreed on message framings will give policy makers confidence over the level of support and resonance that these ideas have across the wider public.

Evidence also shows that when the public know that policies were developed through a deliberative process with ‘people like them’, their support for the policies increases.

DELIBERATION CREATES SPACE FOR NUANCED, MIDDLE GROUND VIEWS TO BE HEARD

Analyses of deliberative methods show participants tend to move towards more conditional,¹⁰³ internally consistent, and moderate positions,¹⁰⁴ rather than simply becoming more liberal or conservative.¹⁰⁵ This is crucial in immigration policy where, despite public discourse being dominated by the loudest and most polarising voices, a plurality of people hold balanced, moderate views and are amenable to finding common ground with others.¹⁰⁶ Participants in deliberative exercises demonstrate higher factual understanding of policy trade-offs, greater tolerance for opposing views, and increased willingness to revise initial positions when exposed to balanced evidence and peer reasoning.¹⁰⁷

Research from Santa Clara University shows that deliberation encourages learning, moderation, mutual understanding, and interpersonal trust rather than polarisation.¹⁰⁸ Importantly, this study found no evidence of the process driving opinion polarisation among participants, including those from groups that are often assumed to be more vulnerable to polarising dynamics; even where deliberation took place within social “enclaves” – defined by background characteristics such as income or ethnic background – participants did not move towards more extreme positions.

When the National Centre for Social Research ran a deliberation on post-Brexit immigration policy, participants’ attitudes became more nuanced as a result of the deliberation. Amongst Leave voters (who are, on the whole, more conservative on immigration) there was greater agreement that immigration is good for the economy (from 15% to 58%) and culturally enriching (from 42% to 50%). Similarly, more broadly liberal Remain voters became more likely to agree that EU migrants should have to apply to come to Britain (from 38% to 63%). Hence the deliberation moved the views of both groups towards each other.

It is crucial that the government hears from the largest chunk of the public – those who are more nuanced and balanced in their views – as this often unheard plurality are those that they need electorally to buy into their reforms.

103 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1478929921102090>

104 <https://faculty.wcas.northwestern.edu/jnd260/pub/Crisis%20of%20Democracy%20and%20the%20Science%20of%20Deliberation.pdf>

105 <https://ejpr.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1475-6765.12207>

106 <https://natcen.ac.uk/publications/british-social-attitudes-41-immigration>

107 <https://www.amphilsoc.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/attachments/Fishkin.pdf>

108 <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1028&context=comm>

DELIBERATION TO BUILD TRUST AROUND IMMIGRATION POLICY

Immigration is an area where the trust deficit is particularly acute. British Future's National Conversation report concludes that *"the current immigration system does not command public trust and support"* and argues that confidence cannot be rebuilt without engaging the public directly in debates about trade-offs and priorities.¹⁰⁹

Polling for Demos's [Citizens' White Paper](#) found that deliberative approaches to policymaking can strengthen public trust: people were 26% more likely to express trust in policy and decision-making when policies had been developed through deliberative processes by people like them, compared to when the policies had been developed solely through internal government processes.¹¹⁰ Similarly, the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) suggests that new forms of public engagement can help improve public trust in institutions by demonstrating that people's views are considered and can influence outcomes, with clear links between the engagement and decision-making.¹¹¹

The 2024 government-commissioned Khan Review on social cohesion and democratic resilience recommended increased application of deliberative processes across policymaking in the UK as it has the power to increase trust and strengthen the liberal democratic model – concluding that *"taking a deliberative democracy approach can reinvigorate our democratic model"*.¹¹²

Specifically, it highlights how these processes have been especially powerful in unpicking significant, contentious issues with complex trade-offs and strong ethical dimensions – reaching resolutions that build trust through public engagement. For example, in Ireland, a Citizens' Assembly met between 2016-17 to discuss the divisive and emotionally loaded issue of abortion – producing policy proposals with broad reach across divides, and that were ultimately adopted following a referendum on changing the national constitution to legalise abortion.¹¹³

Therefore, as government seeks to build trust and consensus around their approach to immigration, deliberative democracy is an invaluable way of bringing the public along with policymaking.

DELIBERATION TO BUILD A BETTER EVIDENCE BASE THAT IS LOCALLY NUANCED AND BASED ON WHAT 'INTEGRATION' MEANS TO PEOPLE

Immigration is experienced locally, and so is integration. Public attitudes towards immigration are strongly shaped by perceptions of how well integration is working locally.¹¹⁴ Public judgements about whether integration is *"working"* are typically formed through everyday experiences in neighbourhoods, workplaces, schools, and public services – meaning integration is inherently place-based, shaped by local conditions and institutions.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that finding a single conceptual, nationally-applicable definition of integration is so challenging: there isn't one. For some, it relates primarily to language and employment; for others, it is about shared norms, neighbourliness, safety, access to services or fairness in how public resources are allocated. These understandings vary not only between regions, but within towns and cities themselves, reflecting different lived experiences of change. Headline indicators can capture broad attitudes, but they struggle to explain why people feel as they do, how local context shapes those views or which aspects of integration matter most in particular places.

109 <https://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Final-report.National-Conversation.17.9.18.pdf>

110 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Citizens-White-Paper-July-2024_final.pdf

111 <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/POST-PB-0066/POST-PB-0066.pdf>

112 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65fdbfd265ca2ffef17da79c/The_Khan_review.pdf

113 <https://oecd-opsi.org/innovations/the-irish-citizens-assembly/>

114 <https://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Final-report.National-Conversation.17.9.18.pdf>

Deliberation produces a richer and more credible evidence base, surfacing the specific pressures and dynamics that shape integration in a given place – whether that is housing availability, school capacity, labour market conditions, or the visibility of local institutions.

This helps policymakers prioritise interventions and tailor responses to local conditions. This strengthens the link between evidence, policy design and implementation, ensuring that integration strategies are shaped by what people actually experience and value in their communities, rather than by abstract or nationally imposed definitions.

Where integration policy is usually framed as one-sided – placing the burden on immigrants alone – a better and more sustainable approach would be a new deal that puts responsibility for integration and social cohesion onto the collective. It would be a partnership approach with rights and responsibilities for all the actors in the system: the state, citizens, communities, immigrants, local government, and civil society.

The value of deliberation in shaping locally grounded understandings of integration is illustrated by the Citizens' Jury convened in the German-speaking Community of Belgium – demonstrating how deliberative processes can translate complex and sensitive questions about immigration into balanced, actionable policy recommendations rooted in local realities.

CASE STUDY

EAST BELGIUM – CITIZENS’ JURY ON MUTUAL INTEGRATION RESPONSIBILITIES¹¹⁵

In 2023, the regional Parliament of the German-speaking region of Belgium convened a Citizens’ Jury of 28 randomly selected residents (including people with migrant backgrounds) to ask: *“What can politicians in the German-speaking Community do to make the integration of immigrants in East Belgium even more successful?”*.

Over five sessions, the jury studied issues from language learning and education to employment and social mixing. Their recommendations, handed to Parliament in June 2023, emphasised that integration can only work on a mutual basis: newcomers should make efforts to understand local social norms and engage in volunteering; the community, authorities and exist institutions should expand support like language courses, intercultural training, and an integration ombudsperson to help resolve conflicts.

The jury came up with actionable and impactful proposals for supporting integration, including modest stipends to encourage those helping immigrants; more language classes for migrants; celebrating cultural diversity in school; and that the regional authority should organise training for professionals and volunteers who can provide support on *“intercultural knowledge, intercultural skills, intercultural communication, culture shock and conflict management”*.

The process produced concrete proposals and proved that sensitive topics like immigration and cohesion can be entrusted to deliberative engagement: the public can find balanced solutions that ask both sides to contribute and that are grounded in moderation and reality.

115 <https://www.buergerrat.de/en/news/you-can-never-do-enough-for-integration/>

APPLYING DELIBERATIVE METHODS IN IMMIGRATION POLICYMAKING

Deliberative methods offer a practical way of addressing some of the most difficult design questions in immigration policy. Moving from principle to practice, building on the evidence set out above, we now explore how deliberative methods can be applied to specific, live questions in immigration policymaking where values are contested, trade-offs are unavoidable, and public legitimacy is critical.

DELIBERATION TO DEFINE “CONTRIBUTION” IN AN EARNED SETTLEMENT SYSTEM

The government’s earned settlement proposals explicitly recast settlement as a moral and social contract, rather than an administrative entitlement. By tying permanent residence to assessed “contribution”, there is an implicit claim being made about what newcomers owe to British society.

Different definitions imply different value judgements about what the UK should prioritise. For example: economic productivity, social participation, legal compliance, care for others, or civic engagement. “Contribution” is a normative and contested social concept – begetting ideas of deservedness, reciprocity and membership. The shift to the earned settlement model opens a clear window in which foundational questions must be answered: what should count as contribution, how should different forms of contribution be valued, and what is fair in practice?

Deliberation can help government explore how different values should be balanced. The table below illustrates the types of issues that could be considered, and the kinds of questions a deliberative process could explore.

TABLE 3**ILLUSTRATIVE QUESTIONS - EXPLORING “CONTRIBUTION” IN A DELIBERATION ON EARNED SETTLEMENT**

ISSUE AREA	ILLUSTRATIVE DELIBERATIVE QUESTION
Principle setting	What principles should guide how contribution is defined?
What counts as contribution?	What sort of economic, civic or other contribution should count towards earned settlement? What matters most, and why?
Route differentiation	What should expectations for contribution be for different migration routes?
Responsibility of migrants and that of the community	What does a fair ‘deal’ between migrants and the host society look like when it comes to contribution and settlement?
Measurement and evidence	How should contribution be measured?

DELIBERATION TO DEVELOP A COLLECTIVE AGREEMENT ON INTEGRATION

Integration is not a single outcome or behaviour that individuals can deliver in isolation – it is a relational process, shaped by mutual expectations between newcomers and existing communities, and mediated by local institutions and social norms.

Different policy framings reflect this differently, and thus embed varying assumptions about culture, responsibility, and belonging. While national policy can set certain benchmarks – such as language requirements or civic knowledge examinations – integration in practice depends on the interaction between multiple factors:

- newcomers’ opportunities and constraints;
- institutional behaviour (schools, employers, councils, health services);
- the availability of community infrastructure and shared spaces;
- patterns of social contact and everyday interaction.

Rather than asking the public to respond to pre-defined policy proposals, deliberation can be structured around the core value questions that sit beneath integration debates. This allows participants to reflect on lived experience, consider trade-offs, and articulate expectations not only of newcomers, but also of institutions, employers, communities, and the state. Importantly, this approach helps avoid framing integration in punitive or one-sided terms, instead grounding it in reciprocity and mutual responsibility.

Deliberative engagement on integration could be shaped by the following key issue areas and questions:

TABLE 4

ILLUSTRATIVE QUESTIONS - EXPLORING "INTEGRATION" IN A DELIBERATION ON EARNED SETTLEMENT

ISSUE AREA	ILLUSTRATIVE DELIBERATIVE QUESTION
Principle setting	What principles should guide how integration is encouraged or supported?
Defining success	What would successful integration look like from different perspectives: migrants, long-term residents, and future generations?
Mutual responsibilities	What responsibilities do individuals have toward the communities they live in, and what responsibilities do communities have toward them?
Roles and responsibilities	What role should government, local institutions, employers, communities and individuals play in supporting integration?
Shared norms and values	What role should shared norms, values, and practices play in holding a society together?

RECOMMENDATIONS

Immigration policy sits at the intersection of administrative design, public trust, and long-term social outcomes. In a policy area characterised by high salience and low trust in government delivery, the way decisions are made matters as much as the decisions themselves. For government, this means reforms must be technically robust and visibly grounded in public legitimacy if they are to endure.

The following recommendations set out how deliberative public participation can be used by government to support more legitimate, trusted, and sustainable policymaking on settlement and integration.

RECOMMENDATION 1

MAKE PUBLIC TRUST AND LEGITIMACY AN EXPLICIT OBJECTIVE OF SETTLEMENT AND INTEGRATION REFORM

Government should recognise that settlement and integration policy is not only about technocratic solutions and system performance, but also about public confidence. Building trust, clarity and legitimacy should be stated policy objectives alongside reducing net migration numbers or improving integration outcomes. This framing would align immigration reform with wider commitments to democratic renewal and public engagement.

RECOMMENDATION 2

COMMISSION A NATIONAL DELIBERATIVE PROCESS ON EARNED SETTLEMENT

The Home Office should commission national-level deliberative processes to inform the design of the earned settlement system. These should focus explicitly on value-laden questions such as:

- what forms of contribution should count towards settlement;
- how economic, social and civic contributions should be balanced;
- how fairness should be understood across different routes, sectors and life circumstances.

Participants should be broadly representative of the UK population, supported with balanced evidence, and given sufficient time to deliberate. Government should make clear in advance how the outputs will shape policy decisions.

RECOMMENDATION 3

PILOT PLACE-BASED DELIBERATIVE PROCESSES ON INTEGRATION AND COHESION

Public deliberation should be used to develop a clearer, shared understanding of what “integration” means in practice. This includes:

- reasonable expectations of newcomers (e.g. language learning, civic participation);
- reciprocal expectations of institutions, employers, local authorities and communities;
- how national benchmarks should interact with local variation.

Given that integration is experienced locally, the government should pilot deliberative processes in a small number of diverse localities, working with the leadership of appropriate geographies such as mayoral or combined authorities. These pilots could inform local integration strategies, test how national policy plays out in practice, and generate insights into how settlement and integration expectations vary across different places.

RECOMMENDATION 4

EMBED DELIBERATION WITHIN IMMIGRATION POLICYMAKING

Deliberative public engagement should be embedded as a routine component of policy making on immigration – across settlement and integration, and other aspects of contested immigration policy. This would position deliberation as a complement to existing tools such as impact assessments, consultations, and stakeholder engagement, particularly where policy decisions involve value-laden trade-offs and long-term social consequences.

Embedding deliberation in this way would help ensure that future reforms are informed by considered public judgement, reduce the risk of reactive or polarising policymaking, and create a more consistent approach to building public confidence in immigration policy. Over time, this would also build institutional capability within government to design, commission and use deliberative processes effectively.

CONCLUSION

We need a new deal for immigration: one that is negotiated rather than imposed, nuanced rather than reactive, and grounded in the majority of the public's considered judgement rather than unrepresentative polarised political narratives.

Building a new deal with the public involves recognising that immigration is not experienced in the abstract, and that public attitudes are shaped less by headline economic impacts than by everyday encounters – who and how many people settle in an area, everyday experiences of integration, and social/cultural change at the local level, and – importantly – how these changes are responded to politically and socially.

The 'democratic doom loop' of mistrust, disengagement, and political ineffectiveness, inhibits government's ability to deliver on its democratic promises, which in turn further damages trust in institutions. Immigration is emblematic of this dynamic. Public trust in political actors to manage immigration is low and policy delivery is widely perceived as ineffective. Policy debates are shaped by polarising, unrepresentative narratives that fail to reflect how people actually understand fairness, contribution, and belonging.

This creates little margin for error in how policy is shaped, introduced, and communicated. Policy that fails to engage with people's lived realities risks remaining technically coherent but socially brittle, unable to command durable public consent. **Rebuilding public trust – breaking the doom loop – requires a shift in how immigration policy is made as well as what it delivers.**

As the government pushes ahead with bold immigration reforms, there is an opportunity to rebuild public trust and confidence around policies that recognisably reflect most people's real values and priorities, instead of giving in to the loudest, polarising views that are typically afforded disproportionate weight.

Given this, deliberative public participation is an invaluable tool for government: for enhancing the evidence base; exploring deep complexities and nuanced value-judgments; and moving away from the unrepresentative poles and vested interests that skew perception of public opinion, towards the more balanced views of the bulk of the population.

Deliberation enables a representative sample of the public to engage with evidence, interrogate trade-offs, and reach considered conclusions on the values embedded in policy. In doing so, government can demonstrate that policymakers do listen to people, and that immigration policy can be made out of a strong evidence base that effectively responds to public sentiment.

Many parts of the immigration system are shaped by contested judgements, high salience, and low trust – and would therefore benefit from structured opportunities for the public to engage with evidence and trade-offs. While we have focused on settlement and integration as particularly tangible and timely areas for deliberation, the value of deliberative public involvement extends across immigration policy as a whole. Other areas where public

deliberation to shape immigration policy would be an asset include questions over overall immigration goals and priorities, humanitarian and refugee policy, and labour migration and economic needs.

Explicitly, immigration reform has been framed as an antidote to populism – formulating policy that responds to real public priorities rather than dramatic political rhetoric – but immigration policies that rely on loosely defined concepts such as “meaningful contribution” and “integration” risks undermining confidence if those concepts are not clearly grounded in public values and expectations.

A new contribution-based settlement system must reflect what the public understands to be meaningful contributions. Otherwise, reforms could backfire spectacularly: there is the potential to foster further polarisation and trust degradation if the changes are seen as elite-driven and opaque. This new settlement system can only have true public buy-in if the understanding of contribution is congruent with what the public see as reasonable.

Likewise, acting on implicit assumptions about what “good integration” looks like means that obligations could be placed solely on migrants, expectations are set for communities, and enforcement decisions are made without those assumptions having been publicly tested or agreed. If local nuances are unaccounted for, integration strategies will always feel abstract to communities, and thus be applied ineffectively.

There is an immense opportunity to depolarise immigration and build back public trust in a system that feels practical and realistic, fair and legally sound. It is possible to build a new deal on immigration that is in tune with the public such that they recognise their values being applied within the policy. **Deliberative public participation is the way to achieve this.**

Rebuilding public trust – **breaking the doom loop** – requires a shift in how immigration policy is made as well as what it delivers.

There is an immense opportunity to **depolarise immigration and build back public trust** in a system that feels practical and realistic, fair and legally sound.

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DEMOS

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