

# Future of Britain after the EU Referendum

## Summary of Topic 1 Migration to the UK



Economic  
and Social  
Research Council

What UK  
Thinks 

**NatCen**  
Social Research

# Background to Topic 1

## Migration to the UK

Prepared by Madeleine Sumption and Robert McNeil, Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford.

### The policy challenge

Migration policies require governments to balance many priorities. When the government makes decisions about who should be able to live or work in the UK, it must consider objectives that range from boosting economic growth and improving the wellbeing of existing UK residents, to supporting local communities and responding to public concerns about migration.

These objectives can sometimes conflict. For example, restricting entry of the partners of low-income UK citizens might reduce costs to public finances but hurt British citizens by separating them from family members. Auctioning off visas to the highest bidder might be economically beneficial but politically unpopular. These tensions mean that there is rarely a 'right answer' when it comes to immigration policy. Rather, policymaking is a question of weighing up different priorities based on one's values and an understanding of the evidence.

### A brief overview of migration to the UK

The UK's immigration policies are currently very different for EU and non-EU citizens. Until the end of the post-Brexit 'transition period', EU citizens can move to the UK without restrictions under EU 'free movement' rules, while non-EU citizens must apply for permission. The government has said that from January 2021, free movement will end, and a new immigration system will be introduced that requires EU citizens to have permission to live here too. This briefing proceeds on the assumption that this will indeed happen, even though there are some variants of Brexit (such as the 'Norway model') in which free movement would continue. It is also possible that the 'transition period' could be extended, delaying the introduction of the proposed post-Brexit immigration system.

Most migrants granted permission to live and work in the UK fall into one of four categories: workers, students, family members and refugees.<sup>1</sup> In 2018, the most common reasons for coming to the UK were work (an estimated 36% of those moving to the UK for at least a year) and study (35%), family (9%) and other reasons including asylum (12%).<sup>2</sup> However, family migrants are more likely to stay in the UK permanently compared to people coming for work or study, so they make a larger contribution to the growth in the migrant population over time. In 2018, 44% of migrants living in the UK said that they had originally come for family reasons.

In 2018, about 14% of the UK's population were born abroad. Of these people, 39% came from EU countries, and Poland and India were the most common countries of birth. The share of the UK's population born abroad has increased significantly in recent decades, up from 8% in 2004.

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<sup>1</sup> A person may have several motivations for moving, but they will have only one type of visa at any given time.

<sup>2</sup> Note that these figures include British citizens who were previously living overseas (approximately 13% of all incoming migrants); some migrants do not give a reason for migrating so these figures do not sum to 100%.

## Question 1.1

**Should EU nationals now be subject to the same immigration rules as non-EU nationals?  
Should country of origin be taken into account at all?**

Currently, the main policies that admit migrants to the UK for work, study, or family apply uniformly to all non-EU citizens – that is, everyone has to meet the same criteria regardless of their nationality. The government has proposed that after the post-Brexit transition period EU citizens should be brought into the same immigration system as non-EU citizens.

However, there are some exceptions to this uniformity. For example, the Youth Mobility Scheme only admits people from certain high-income countries including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Japan and Korea for up to 2 years to work, and British citizens can participate in similar schemes in those countries. There are sometimes migration-related rules in free trade agreements (e.g. with Canada) but these tend to be relatively minor in the context of the overall immigration system.

### **Option 1: The UK should apply the same immigration rules to all countries**

The main argument in favour of having a single immigration system for all nationalities is simplicity. In the case of labour migration, for example, what matters for employers is a worker's skills rather than the passport they hold – nationality alone does not make someone more productive or employable. Having different policies for different nationalities brings costs because it makes the immigration system more complex and makes it more difficult

for employers and migrants to understand the rules. If the rules are different for people of different nationalities, employers might have to offer different 'packages' to different staff doing the same work (for example, different contract lengths or rights for family members to come with them).

### **Option 2: The UK should apply different rules to EU and non-EU countries**

There are some ways in which having different migration policies for people of different nationalities could have benefits, however. For example, the government might want to make it possible for UK citizens to move to other countries, and a reciprocal agreement would be one way of doing this. Similarly, if other countries view immigration to the UK as a valuable opportunity for their citizens, they may be willing to offer concessions that the UK values in other fields as part of trade negotiations. In addition, governments may prefer to admit people from specific countries in order to promote social and cultural links with those countries or if those nationals have a good track record of complying with the immigration rules (e.g. not overstaying visas). These are all possible reasons for having migration policies that vary for people of different nationalities.

Making it easier for people from the EU to come to Britain than people from other countries may be considered useful to the UK because of its geographical proximity, the strong trade relationship, existing cultural links and the history of migration in both directions between the UK and other EU countries. (As well as approximately 3.6m EU citizens living in the UK, there are estimated to be around one million UK citizens living and working in the EU.)

### **Option 3: The UK should have different rules for different countries, but membership of the EU should not be the key distinction**

Instead of having different policies for EU and non-EU citizens, the UK government could decide to differentiate between other groups of countries. For example, it could distinguish between countries depending on whether they have agreed to a trade deal with the UK or whether citizens from that country are thought to be likely to illegally overstay their visas. Or the government might decide that immigration policy should facilitate migration from countries that have longstanding historical links with the UK or whose citizens are likely to integrate more quickly from a cultural perspective. Supporters of this approach argue that there is nothing special about migrants from the EU, and that it would make more sense to offer more generous policies to a different set of countries (for example, Commonwealth countries or other English-speaking countries).

The main arguments can be summarised as follows:

### Question 1.1

**Should EU nationals now be subject to the same immigration rules as non-EU nationals?  
Should country of origin be taken into account at all?**

#### OPTION 1: The UK should apply the same immigration rules to all countries

##### Arguments For

- Having a clear and simple process avoids the costs and bureaucracy involved in having multiple sets of different rules.

##### Arguments Against

- The government should give preference to migrants from countries that give preference to UK citizens wishing to move there.
- Citizens from some countries may be more likely to overstay illegally – tougher rules should be applied to these countries.

#### OPTION 2: The UK should apply different rules to EU and non-EU countries

##### Arguments For

- Making it easier for people from the EU to come to Britain makes sense given its geographical proximity, and the fact that already many EU citizens live in the UK and vice-versa.
- It might make it easier to negotiate a close trading relationship with the EU and rules that make it easier for UK citizens to move to the EU.

##### Arguments Against

- There is nothing special about migrants from the EU. For example, given their historical links with Britain, preference should be given to citizens from Commonwealth countries.

#### OPTION 3: The UK should have different rules for different countries, but membership of the EU should not be the key distinction

##### Arguments For

- There is nothing special about migrants from the EU. The government should have different rules based on individual countries' circumstances, such as whether they have agreed a trade deal with the UK, the relative fiscal impact on the UK by immigrants from that country or historical risk that they might overstay visas.

##### Arguments Against

- People have a greater incentive to move to countries that are closer to them - and especially if there are existing or potential trade agreements that could be made.
- There is now a long history of migration between the UK and EU countries and these cultural and economic relationships should be maintained.

## Question 1.2

**Who should be able to come to the UK for work? What criteria should be used to decide which workers can come here?**

There are currently several different ways for people to come to the UK to work. Employers can apply to bring in non-EU citizens on long-term work visas if the person is in a graduate job and earns above a certain amount (the amount varies by occupation but is usually at least £20,800 for recent graduates and at least £30,000 for experienced workers under the proposed future immigration system the top threshold is set to fall to around £25,600). Most jobs in the UK do not meet these criteria. However, there are also some smaller routes that allow people to work in jobs at any skill or salary level. The largest route is the 2-year Youth Mobility Scheme visa for young people from 8 high-income countries including Australia (mentioned above). People with a UK-born grandparent can also apply for an 'ancestry visa' that allows them to work in any job and to apply to stay permanently if they want to. There is also a special short-term work visa for seasonal agricultural workers.

Over the past 15 years, free movement from EU countries has been by far the main route through which people have come to the UK for work. If free movement comes to an end after Brexit, one of the main questions to be resolved is whether there should be new routes for people to come to work in jobs that don't qualify for the 'skilled' work visas currently in place.

Unlike other areas of migration policy, decisions about work-related migration tend to be primarily based on economic objectives. However, existing research has not produced a consensus on what policy options bring the greatest economic benefits or how much work-related migration is 'needed' into different types of jobs. Research on the economics of migration has consistently found that high-skilled migration brings economic benefits, such as increasing productivity and government revenues. There is more disagreement among economists about whether low-skilled migration is economically beneficial, although most believe that any positive or negative impacts are quite small.

### **Option 1: Only give people work visas if they are coming to work in high-skilled jobs**

Most immigration systems define skill by looking at the job someone is doing rather than the educational qualifications they have. However, a policy of only allowing people to come to Britain to work if they have a high-skilled job would need to determine what counts as a skilled job. The main options are the length of the training required for a job or the salary.

Proponents of only allowing work-related migration in high-skilled jobs point to economic research suggesting that it is only for these jobs that there is a strong consensus that migration brings economic benefits. They note that some people who work in low-paid jobs will create costs for taxpayers, particularly if they stay in the UK for long enough to have children or require healthcare services. They also note that migration contributes to population growth, which pushes up the cost of housing. Meanwhile, some point to research that shows that low-skilled migration has little economic impact and argue that the lack of a clear benefit means this kind of migration is not necessary. Reducing low-skilled migration is therefore likely to be a less costly way to address public concerns about overall immigration levels. In any event, many migrants in low-skilled jobs do not come on work visas, but through other routes, such as having a family member in the UK or as a refugee. Consequently, a dedicated work route for low-skilled migrants may not be necessary (although the numbers of such migrants available to employers may be relatively small if the rules for those routes are restrictive too).

Critics of this approach argue that there is still strong demand for workers in low-skilled jobs, many of which are relatively unattractive to UK citizens. For example, the social care industry relies heavily on migrant workers to provide important services that many people value. Seasonal agricultural work also relies primarily on a migrant workforce. It may not be possible for producers to grow labour intensive items like strawberries and raspberries because there are no migrant workers to pick them.

## Option 2: Admit workers to a wide range of jobs at all levels of skill

A second option is to allow workers to come to the UK for a wide range of jobs at any level of skill. They could simply be required to meet conditions such as being able to speak English at a certain level, having certain qualifications, or being from a particular country (as is currently the case for the Youth Mobility Scheme).

Proponents of this approach argue that employers in many industries want to hire migrant workers and the government should not be 'picking winners' by deciding which industries or employers can do so. They point out, correctly, that there is only limited evidence that low-skilled migration has a negative impact on British workers. Some also argue that allowing people to work in many different jobs helps to protect them from exploitation as people are more likely to be able to leave a bad job. People who start off in low-paid jobs may be able to move up into more skilled ones over time as they learn English and get to know the UK better.

Critics of this approach, by contrast, highlight the arguments discussed above for Option 1.

## Option 3: Issue work visas primarily for those in high-skilled jobs, but with some exceptions

A third option is to stick to the overall principle that most work visas should be for skilled jobs but allow some exceptions. Proponents of this approach argue that it would be a reasonable compromise between the two options above. It would enable the government to gain most of the advantages of Option 1, but still admit lower-skilled workers where it feels that it would be beneficial. For example, the government might decide that there should be a special route for recruiting social care workers from overseas, because employers struggle to attract British workers at current rates of pay. Agriculture is another industry that is often mentioned as a 'special case'.

Critics of this option argue that if low-skilled work routes are limited to particular industries, this ties workers to specific jobs (and specific employers). Otherwise they might not be doing the jobs the government admitted them for. This makes workers more dependent on their employer and increases the risk of exploitation; if workers find it difficult to move between jobs, employers have less need to compete with each other for workers by offering good pay and conditions.

The second argument against this approach is that it is not easy to decide which employers or jobs should be eligible. On the one hand, the decision could be delegated to an 'expert body' that analyses data and evidence to decide where there may be shortages or which industries are least able to cope without overseas workers. On the other hand, the government could simply choose the industries it most wants to support based on public consultation or its own judgment (or both). The 'expert' approach has the advantage of being non-political, and experts will generally be less susceptible than politicians to lobbying (although expert bodies may also be swayed by lobbyists). However, experts are not necessarily well placed to balance the trade-offs between the winners and losers of policy decisions on migration, which is often a fundamentally political matter. In other words, both approaches have drawbacks.

Even people who are very familiar with the research evidence do not agree on which of these three broad options makes most sense. To some extent, their views depend on what risks they are more concerned about. Some people are more concerned about the risk that businesses in some sectors will struggle without migrant workers and that this will reduce economic growth, for example, while others may be more concerned about the risk of higher population growth pushing up house prices or requiring additional homebuilding.

Overall, the main arguments are summarised overleaf.

## Question 1.2

**Who should be able to come to the UK for work? What criteria should be used to decide which workers can come here?**

### OPTION 1: Only give people work visas if they are coming to work in high-skilled jobs

#### Arguments For

- Economic research suggests that admitting low-paid migrants into the country can create costs for taxpayers, e.g. if they stay long enough to have children or require care from the NHS.
- Migration contributes to population growth, which pushes up the cost of housing.
- Research evidence suggests that low-skilled migration brings relatively little economic benefit.

#### Arguments Against

- While there may not be much evidence that low-skilled migration brings large benefits, there is little evidence that it brings large costs, either.
- There is strong demand for migrant workers in low-skilled jobs, many of which are relatively low paid and offer conditions that are unattractive to UK citizens, e.g. in social care.
- Some sectors, e.g. agriculture often have low-levels of automation and rely primarily on a migrant workforce. Producers may be unable to grow labour-intensive foods such as strawberries if there are no migrant workers to pick them.

### OPTION 2: Admit workers in a wide range of jobs at all skill levels

#### Arguments For

- Employers in many industries want to hire migrant workers and the government should not be 'picking winners' by deciding which industries or employers can do so.
- Limited evidence that low-skilled migration has a negative impact on British workers or the economy.
- Migrants who start off in low-paid jobs may eventually be able to move into better paid work.

#### Arguments Against

- If there were less low-skilled migration, employers would simply adapt to rely on these workers less for example, by increasing wages to attract UK workers, or importing products that require low-cost labour from abroad rather than making them in the UK.
- Admitting low-paid migrants into the country can create costs for taxpayers, e.g. if they stay long enough to have children or require care from the NHS.

### OPTION 3: Issue work visas primarily for those in high-skilled jobs, but with some exceptions

#### Arguments For

- Would enable the government to gain most of the advantages of restricting low skilled migration, but still admit lower-skilled workers where it feels that it would be beneficial.
- For example, the government might decide that it is not realistic to pay social care workers enough to attract more British workers and that a special work visa should be available for these jobs.

#### Arguments Against

- Low-skilled migrants would have to be tied to specific jobs (and specific employers) to make sure they are doing the jobs for which they have been admitted. This makes workers more dependent on their employer and increases the risk they are exploited.
- It is not easy to decide which employers or low-paid jobs should be eligible for such schemes.



## Question 1.3

### What rules should govern the admission of family members of British nationals or settled migrants?

British citizens or foreign citizens who are permanently settled in the UK can sponsor applications for their family members to join them in the UK. Under current rules, these opportunities are mostly available only to UK residents' partners and children, although in a small number of cases it is possible to bring in other adult family members (i.e. parents) who are dependent on the UK resident for their care. This section focuses on partners, who account for the largest amount of family migration. (Partners joining migrants who hold temporary visas for work or study, face different rules that are not discussed here.)

UK citizens who want to bring their spouse or partner to the UK from a non-EU country must currently earn at least £18,600 per year (or more if the partner has a child who is not a UK citizen). About 60% of UK citizens who are working as employees in the UK earn this amount or more, while about 40% earn less. In addition, partners must be able to speak at least basic English and demonstrate "good character" (e.g. no criminal record). Because of the income requirement in particular, the UK is considered to have one of the most restrictive migration policies towards partners of any high-income country.

### Options: (1) maintain, (2) increase or (3) reduce the restrictions on the ability of UK citizens to bring their partners into the country

Proponents of more restrictive family migration policies argue that family income and language ability are important to ensuring that migrants will be able to integrate, both economically and socially. Language proficiency is one of the most important skills enabling people to work in the UK and develop social connections with English speakers, and is also often seen as an indicator of cultural integration. Some also argue that income-related restrictions on family migration are economically beneficial because they reduce the number of low-income people coming to the UK. Families earning at least £18,600 will usually be ineligible for income-related welfare benefits, and so are not expected to require support from public funds. Others argue that restrictive policies towards partners are needed as part of a strategy to reduce overall migration levels.

Critics of income requirements argue that people's ability to live with their loved ones should not depend on their income, and that restricting family migration hurts the children of couples who are separated by migration policies. They argue that the income threshold is discriminatory, since lower-earning groups of people such as women or young people will find it more difficult to bring their partner to the UK. They also say that if the purpose of the income threshold is to make sure that people do not rely on benefits, it would be better simply to restrict a family's access to benefits.<sup>3</sup> While it is widely accepted that language is important to family migrants' social integration, critics of language requirements argue that migrants will learn English faster if they can come to the UK first; instead of excluding people with poor English skills, the government should provide free language classes for newly arrived family members.

People who are concerned about restrictions on the migration of partners sometimes argue that if income thresholds have to be used, they should be lower so that they only prevent people from living together in the UK if they would be living in significant poverty. Similarly, some argue that the government should be more flexible in the way it allows couples to demonstrate that they can live without taxpayer support—for example, that the government should let couples rely on promises of support from their parents or other family members, and that it should take into account the partner's potential future income after they arrive in the UK. (Currently, the income threshold must be met using the UK partner's income alone, unless the non-UK citizen partner is already working in the UK on another type of visa such as a work visa.) The argument against allowing promises of support or future income is that it could be open to abuse, and the promised income may not materialise in practice.

The arguments in favour of and against each option are summarised overleaf.

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<sup>3</sup> Family migrants are already ineligible for benefits for the first five years before they can be granted permanent settlement, but the family as a whole may still receive some benefits that are calculated at the family level, notably tax credits and housing benefit.



## Question 1.3

What rules should govern the admission of family members of British nationals or settled migrants? Should we (1) maintain, (2) increase or (3) reduce the current restrictions on the rights of UK citizens to bring in their partners?

### OPTION 1: Maintain current restrictions on bringing in partners

#### Arguments For

- An adequate family income and proficiency in English are important for integration.
- Families earning more than £18,600 will usually be ineligible for welfare and so should not need support from public funds.
- Current rules are restrictive enough: further restrictions would prevent the entry of family members who would have not faced any problems integrating.

#### Arguments Against

- People's ability to live with their loved ones should not depend on their income.
- Restricting family income hurts the children of couples separated by migration policies.
- Women and younger people find it more difficult to bring their partner into the UK.
- Partners would learn English more quickly if they came to the UK first.

### OPTION 2: Increase restrictions on bringing in partners

#### Arguments For

- It would further reduce the number of low-income people coming to the UK.
- Language restrictions are not rigorous enough – only basic proficiency is required, which is not enough to develop social connections with people in Britain or, in most jobs, to be able to work.

#### Arguments Against

- The UK already has among the most restrictive family migration policies in the high-income world.
- A higher income threshold could mean that a majority of UK citizens would be unable to bring a non-EU partner into the UK.

### OPTION 3: Reduce restrictions on bringing in partners

#### Arguments For

- Any income requirement should only prevent someone bringing their partner into the UK if they would be living in significant poverty.
- The government should be more flexible in allowing couples to demonstrate they can live without taxpayer support for example with support from parents or other family members, or the partner's potential future income after they arrive in the UK.
- Around 40% of UK citizens are unable to meet the requirement of an annual income of £18,600.

#### Arguments Against

- An adequate family income is important to ensuring that migrants do not live in poverty. Robust rules are necessary to ensure those coming have the resources to play a full part in British life and do not place excessive financial burden on the UK.
- Lower language proficiency would make it harder for partners to find work and develop social connections with people in the UK.
- Reducing restrictions on partners would mean higher overall migration and more low-income people in the UK.

## Question 1.4

### Should there be caps on or targets for the number of migrants admitted to the UK?

Opinion polls show that the British public generally support the idea of reducing migration. However, research cannot provide an evidence-based way to specify an 'optimal' number of migrants into the UK per year or an ideal level of net migration. One reason for this is that there are many different types of migration—e.g. family members, students, workers and refugees—and in each case the arguments for and against admitting people are quite different. As a result, any numerical target or limit the government chooses must be arbitrary. Faced with public concern about levels of migration and its impact on the UK economy, society and culture, however, governments are often under pressure to specify what number of migrants should be admitted or to place a legal limit the number of migrants.

#### Option 1: Cap the number of visas that can be issued to enter the UK each year

One way of limiting migration is to cap the number of visas that can be issued in each category. Proponents of this approach argue that it is an effective way to make sure that migration is actually reduced, and that caps provide a transparent way of showing the public that migration is under control.

Hard caps on the number of visas issued often create unintended consequences, however. Once the cap is reached, some people applying for visas will be rejected – even if most people agree that this type of person should usually be allowed to come to the UK. A recent example of this is a cap on the number of skilled work visas for non-EU citizens that was introduced in the UK in 2011. When the cap was reached before the end of 2017, many doctors coming to work in the NHS had their applications rejected. Consequences such as these are hard to avoid if visa caps are put in place.

Unlike almost all the other areas discussed in this briefing, the evidence on this option is relatively straightforward: there is widespread agreement among experts that caps on specific categories of visa are not a good way to manage migration. The main reason for capping immigration is therefore likely to be that it reassures the public that migration is under control.

#### Option 2: Don't cap specific categories of visas, but set a target for the level of migration

Instead of setting hard caps on the number of different types of visa that can be issued, the government could announce a target for the level of migration that it considers to be desirable. The best-known example in the UK is the Conservative Party's target, first set in 2010, to reduce overall net migration to less than 100,000 per year, though targets do not have to be for net migration.<sup>4</sup> They could specify the number of people entering the country, or in specific categories (e.g. work). Once such targets have been set, the government must then introduce policies that are expected to result in the desired numbers.

The main argument in favour of numerical targets that are set by government is that they provide a transparent way for it to show what level of migration it believes is appropriate and allow people to see whether it has achieved its objectives. Targets are much more flexible than caps, in part because they can be more easily changed or withdrawn if the government feels it is necessary.

A drawback of numerical targets is that if the policy debate focuses primarily on the number of people entering or settling in the UK, there may be less discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of specific policies on who is admitted. The public may support the idea of reducing migration, but the actual policies that would be required to achieve it can be divisive. For example, policies to reduce family migration have led to the 'income threshold' that prevents UK citizens who earn less than £18,600 per year from being joined here by their husband or wife. Statistically this threshold is more likely to be met by certain groups – such as men, and Londoners – which has generated complaints of bias, though others consider it an acceptable trade-off for a simple system. As with visa caps (Option 1), numerical targets also face the problem that there is no 'optimal' level for overall migration.

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<sup>4</sup> Net migration is the number of people moving to the UK minus the number of people leaving.

Finally, it is difficult to devise a set of policies that will guarantee a given number of migrants, because the number of people who choose to migrate will naturally fluctuate up and down over time (for example as a result of changes in the economy) even if policy does not change. This creates the risk that the government will announce a target but not actually meet it.

### **Option 3: Use selection criteria to regulate migration instead of numerical caps or targets**

A third option is to choose who can or cannot come to live or work in the UK based on their skills, family connections or other criteria, and to allow numbers to fluctuate over time. Under this approach, the government sets criteria to determine who is allowed to come to the UK. This could mean having a job offer at a certain salary level, taking a particular kind of job (e.g. nursing), coming as a student to an approved university, or having a partner who is a UK citizen. Even though the eligibility criteria may stay the same for several years, the actual number of migrants is unlikely to be constant, because demand to move to the UK would be higher than in some years than others. For example, employers generally hire more workers from overseas when the economy is growing quickly, and fewer during recessions.

People who favour this approach argue that the number of migrants is not what makes most difference to the impact of migration – what matters more is who migrates to the UK and what they do while they are here (e.g. what skills they bring, whether they work, or how they interact with non-migrants in the UK). Regulating migration using selection criteria rather than numerical limits enables a discussion about which migrants should and should not be admitted. For example, the government might decide that doctors and nurses should always be admitted if they have a job to come to in the NHS, but that IT specialists earning below a certain amount should not be eligible because employers can more easily hire UK workers for these jobs. If numbers are allowed to fluctuate over time, the government can decide what the eligibility criteria are and stick to them; if numbers must remain constant, the eligibility criteria may have to fluctuate in order to deliver a set number of migrants.

The drawback of this approach is that it makes it difficult for the government to make specific promises about how much migration there will be. Critics argue that without a transparent numerical objective, the government will not have a strong enough incentive to introduce policies that will reduce migration.

The main arguments are summarised overleaf.

## Question 1.4

Should there be caps on or targets for the number of migrants admitted to the UK?

### OPTION 1: Cap the number of visas that can be issued to enter the UK each year

#### Arguments For

- An effective way of making sure that migration is actually reduced. Provides a transparent way of reassuring the public that migration is under control.
- May encourage increased domestic training for in-demand professions by limiting access to their foreign counterparts.

#### Arguments Against

- There is no 'optimal' level of migration.
- A hard cap can have unintended and unpopular consequences. Once the cap is reached, some people applying for visas will be rejected even if most people agree that this type of person (such as a doctor) should usually be allowed to come to the UK.

### OPTION 2: Don't cap specific categories of visas, but set a political target for the level of migration

#### Arguments For

- Targets provide a way for the government to set what it believes is an appropriate level of migration and allows people to see whether it has achieved its objectives.
- Targets are much more flexible than caps and can more easily be changed or withdrawn if the government feels it is necessary.

#### Arguments Against

- There is no 'optimal' level of migration – and no guarantee that any target will be met.
- Targets may focus the policy debate on the number of people entering or settling in the UK. As a result, the question of who is admitted may be neglected.

### OPTION 3: Use selection criteria to regulate migration instead of numerical caps or targets

#### Arguments For

- The number of migrants is not what makes most difference to the impact of migration – what matters more is who migrates to the UK and what they do while they are here.

#### Arguments Against

- Without a transparent numerical objective, the government will not have a strong enough incentive to introduce policies to reduce migration.

## Question 1.5

### Under what conditions should migrants be able to stay in the UK permanently?

When someone gets a visa to live or work in the UK it is initially usually temporary. Many people coming to the UK on visas intend to stay only temporarily, whether for a few weeks or for several years. However, some can apply to stay permanently (i.e. receive a status known as 'settlement'), usually after at least five years.

How easy it is to settle permanently currently depends on why someone has been given permission to live in the UK. In particular, many work-visa holders are expected to leave rather than settle here. Some work visas are strictly limited in length (e.g. 1-2 years), and some workers who stay up to five years will not qualify for settlement if their earnings are lower than £35,800. To stay permanently, most migrants must pass an English language test and a 'Life in the UK' test, which tests people's knowledge of UK history, government institutions and culture.

### Option 1: Encourage temporary migration and make it relatively difficult for (work) migrants to settle permanently

The UK could decide to make more use of temporary visas, for example by limiting the duration of the visa, requiring people to spend time outside of the country before getting a new visa, and/or making the criteria for permanent settlement harder to achieve (e.g. requiring a level of language ability, skills or income that many would not meet). From an ethical perspective, it is easier to take this approach for work visas than family visas, since making a family visa strictly temporary could mean splitting up the family. The rest of this section focuses on work visas.

Proponents of temporary work-related migration argue that recent migrants tend to make a higher net contribution to public finances, because they are more likely to be young people who do not yet have children and don't need much healthcare. Temporary migration is sometimes seen as a way to satisfy employers' demand for migrant workers in the short run (particularly in low-paid jobs), without having to worry about how well migrants will be able to integrate in the long run, economically or socially. Some argue that it is a good way to facilitate migration in the short run without adding as much to overall population growth in the long term. Others argue that temporary visas enable the UK to 'test out' prospective permanent migrants, only offering visas to those who demonstrate a certain level of integration or economic contribution.

Critics of temporary migration argue that integration takes time, so relying on a rotating pool of temporary workers means that migrants will be less well integrated—e.g. that they will speak less good English and be less able to navigate life and customs in the UK. This may have negative impacts for the communities in which they live. Other arguments against temporary migration include that employers face additional training costs if they frequently lose their staff, and that migrants who are only here for a short time are more likely to be exploited at work because they haven't yet developed the language skills or legal knowledge to stand up for their rights. Some critics also point to the risk that temporary migration may be difficult to enforce, and that migrants may stay on illegally.

### Option 2: Give more migrants an opportunity to stay in the UK, for example by relaxing criteria for applying for permanent settlement

A different approach would be to encourage permanent settlement. There are different ways of doing this. On the one hand, the government could make it easier to switch from strictly temporary to longer-term visas and relax the criteria for settlement (e.g. by dropping the minimum income requirement for workers). This would be expected to lead to higher growth in the non-UK population over time. On the other hand, if the government wanted to keep overall net migration lower, it could make it harder to be admitted initially but easier for those who are admitted to stay permanently.

Broadly speaking, these arguments are the inverse of those discussed above for Option 1. Arguments in favour of facilitating permanent migration include that it encourages integration, including by giving migrants more certainty and thus a greater incentive to learn English and acquire skills or knowledge that are useful for life in the UK. Critics of this approach argue that not all migrants whom it makes sense to admit in the short run (e.g. to satisfy short-term demand from employers) will continue to make contributions in the long run.

The arguments for and against these options are summarised overleaf.

## Question 1.5

**Under what conditions should migrants be able to stay in the UK permanently?**

- **OPTION 1:** Encourage temporary migration and make it relatively difficult for (work) migrants to settle permanently



### Arguments For

- Short-term migrants often make a higher net contribution to the public finances, as they don't have children or need much healthcare.
- This is a way of satisfying employers' demand for migrant workers in the short run (particularly in low-paid jobs), without adding to long-term population growth or having to worry about how well migrants integrate, either economically or socially.
- The UK can 'test out' prospective permanent migrants, only offering permanent visas to those who demonstrate a certain level of integration or economic contribution.



### Arguments Against

- Integration takes time, so relying on a rotating pool of temporary workers means migrants will be less well integrated. This may have negative impacts for the communities in which they live.
- Employers face additional training costs if they frequently lose their staff.
- Migrants who are only here for a short time are more likely to be exploited at work because they haven't developed the language skills or legal knowledge to stand up for their rights.

- **OPTION 2:** Give more migrants an opportunity to stay in the UK, for example by relaxing criteria for applying for permanent settlement



### Arguments For

- Encourages integration. Because they have more certainty, migrants have a greater incentive to learn English and acquire skills or knowledge that are useful for life in the UK.



### Arguments Against

- Can be expected to lead to higher growth in the non-UK population over time unless it was made it harder to be admitted initially.
- Not all migrants whom it makes sense to admit in the short run (e.g. to satisfy short-term demand from employers) will continue to make economic contributions in the long run.



## Question 1.6

### What access to social security should migrants have – and on what terms?

Most migrants from countries that are outside the EU and who do not yet have the permanent right to settle in the UK are ineligible for welfare benefits such as jobseekers' allowance or disability allowance.<sup>5</sup> They will usually have to have lived in the UK for at least five years before they become eligible for such benefits. There are some exceptions, such as people who have been granted humanitarian protection but have not yet been granted settlement.

In contrast, EU citizens working in the UK are currently usually eligible for welfare benefits, but it is expected that after the post-Brexit transition period they will face the same restrictions as non-EU citizens do. Asylum seekers are not eligible for benefits while their claims are pending but may receive more limited financial support through a separate Home Office programme; they become eligible for public funds if they are granted refugee status.

Any migrant who is living in the UK legally can use public services like schools or the National Health Service. However, non-EU migrants pay an additional NHS surcharge – currently a fee of £400 per person per year and due to rise to £624 in October 2020 – when they apply for their visa. Under the proposed post-Brexit immigration system, EU migrants will pay the same surcharge. (People who work after they arrive in the UK will also contribute to the NHS through the ordinary taxes they pay, such as income tax.)

There is little evidence that the UK welfare state acts as a significant draw for migrants.

Non-EU migrants who have not been in the country for several years are not eligible for most benefits, while only a small proportion of recently arrived EU citizens claim them. Making changes to access to the welfare state is therefore not expected to have a large effect on migration levels.

### Options: (1) maintain, (2) increase or (3) reduce restrictions on migrants' access to cash benefits

Currently, migrants who require a visa to live in the UK become eligible for most benefits only after being granted permanent settlement. This usually takes about five years, but for some people it can take up to 10 years. Changing this policy could mean providing access to some or all benefits sooner for some or all migrants (e.g. immediately or after 2-3 years for family migrants);<sup>6</sup> or it could mean making some or all migrants ineligible for benefits for an additional period of time after they have permanent settlement rights. Another way of restricting migrants access to benefits would be to give EU migrants the same entitlements as non-EU citizens, rather than maintaining the current more generous regime.

The main arguments in favour of restrictions on migrants' access to benefits are that it is a way of saving money for the public purse, and that it is only fair that migrants 'pay in' to the tax and benefits system for a period of time before they can be supported by it. A related argument is that once someone has lived in the UK for several years, the UK has responsibilities towards them that they do not have towards people who have only recently moved to the UK.

The main argument in favour of faster access to benefits is that it may help integration and prevent people from living in poverty. People who are not eligible for benefits sometimes find it harder to access training or language classes, which are often only open to benefit recipients.

Given that refugees do have access to benefits, some argue that family migrants should also be allowed to receive them in order to help them establish themselves in the UK. Others argue that restricting access to benefits simply shifts costs to local authorities, who have an obligation to support destitute families with children.

The arguments for and against the three options are summarised overleaf.

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<sup>5</sup> Some benefits, such as tax credits and housing benefit, are given to families rather than individuals. If a non-EU citizen who is not eligible for benefits is part of a couple that includes someone who is eligible for benefits, the family can still receive the benefits.

<sup>6</sup> Most family migrants settle in the UK permanently, even though their initial visas are temporary. By contrast, a majority of people on work visas leave the country within a few years, and most lose their right to live here if they lose their job.

## Question 1.6

How much access to social security should migrants have – and on what terms? Should we (1) maintain, (2) increase or (3) reduce the restrictions on migrants' access to cash benefits

### OPTION 1: Maintain current restrictions on access to cash benefits

#### Arguments For

- A way of saving taxpayers' money.
- It is only fair that migrants 'pay in' to the tax and benefits system for a while before they can be supported by it.
- The UK has little responsibility for those who have only moved recently to the UK.

#### Arguments Against

- Faster access to benefits may help integration (for example, by improving access to language classes) and prevent people from living in poverty.
- Family migrants should be allowed to receive benefits in order to help them establish themselves in the UK.
- Can shift costs on to local councils, who have an obligation to support destitute families with children.

### OPTION 2: Increase restrictions on access to cash benefits

#### Arguments For

- A way of saving taxpayers' money.
- It is only fair that migrants 'pay in' to the tax and benefits system for a considerable period of time before they are supported by it.
- EU citizens moving to the UK should have to wait the same length of time as non-EU citizens before they are eligible for cash benefits.

#### Arguments Against

- Migrants and their families will be at greater risk of ending up in poverty.
- Local councils may find themselves having to support more destitute migrant families with children.

### OPTION 3: Reduce restrictions on access to cash benefits

#### Arguments For

- Faster access to benefits may prevent people from living in poverty and improve migrants' access both to language classes and to job finding services, thereby promoting their integration.
- Family migrants who have access to welfare benefit may establish themselves in the UK more quickly.

#### Arguments Against

- The cost of paying more welfare benefits would fall on taxpayers.
- It is only fair that migrants 'pay in' to the tax and benefits system for a while before they can be supported by it.
- The UK has little responsibility for those who have only moved recently to the UK.

## Question 1.7

**What political rights should migrants have? When should they be granted? How difficult should they be to acquire?**

Migrants who have acquired the permanent right to live in the UK have extensive rights similar to those of UK citizens. For example, there are no restrictions on their right to work or receive benefits. However, one significant right that not all settled migrants have but UK citizens do is the ability to vote in general elections. When deciding who should be able to become a UK citizen, we are not therefore deciding who should get to stay permanently or be able to work in the UK. Instead, we are asking how many of those who already live here should have the full set of legal rights associated with citizenship, including the right to vote.

In practice, the UK currently has a complicated set of rules on who can vote and stand in elections that mean some migrants can vote even though they are not UK citizens. In particular, Irish citizens and citizens of Commonwealth countries have the right to vote in all elections immediately after moving to the UK.

To become UK citizens, migrants must generally have lived in the UK for at least five or six years and already have the permanent right to live in the UK. People who have not already passed language and 'Life in the UK' tests as part of the settlement process (discussed in section 5, above) must pass them to qualify for citizenship. The level of English language required is 'intermediate', sufficient to have conversations about a range of familiar topics, but not necessarily enough to function fully in an English-speaking workplace. Applicants must also have 'good character' which includes paying taxes and not having a recent criminal record. A fee is also charged, at present £1,330 per person, or £1,012 per child for children born in the UK to parents who are not UK citizens or settled residents.

Some settled migrants live permanently in the UK without becoming citizens. There are many reasons for this, including the fact that some countries of origin require people to give up their original citizenship if they become a citizen somewhere else.

### **Option 1: Make it easier for migrants to become UK citizens, for example by reducing fees**

The government could encourage settled/permanent residents to become UK citizens. This could involve making the criteria less demanding, so that, for example, people with limited English could still become citizens. It could also involve reducing the cost.

Proponents of this approach argue that helping migrants to become citizens will encourage a sense of belonging and full participation in society, including in the political process. It would also give politicians an incentive to take their views into account. They note that citizenship fees are significantly higher than the cost of processing the applications, and will be prohibitively expensive for some migrants, especially families where more than one person is applying.

Support for high fees comes primarily from the government, which has argued that fees are required to make the immigration system as a whole self-funding without support from the taxpayer. Others argue that citizenship should be a selective process – for the reasons discussed next.

### **Option 2: Make it harder for migrants to become UK citizens, for example by increasing language requirements or introducing a more difficult 'civic knowledge' test**

Proponents of a more stringent process for becoming a UK citizen argue that raising the bar for eligibility would encourage people to integrate because they will have an incentive to study in order to meet the requirements, for example, by learning English to a higher level. Some argue that the citizenship test should ensure that people becoming full members of society share 'British values' and understand British ways of life.

Critics of this approach argue that a more difficult citizenship process excludes people who already have the right to live here permanently from full membership of society, and thus will reduce social integration. They argue that the rights of citizenship (e.g. voting) are part of the process that helps people participate in British society and thus become more integrated – and that if there are large numbers of long-term residents who cannot vote, politicians will

have no incentive to take their interests into account when they develop policy. Some have also criticised citizenship tests, noting that 1) it is very difficult to test someone's 'values', since applicants may simply learn what the 'correct' answers are for the purposes of the test; and 2) the tests require migrants to have knowledge (e.g. about historical events) that many UK citizens lack.

The arguments for and against the two options are summarised below.

## Question 1.7

**How easy or difficult should it be for migrants to become a British citizen and for example, have the right to vote?**

### OPTION 1: Make it easier for migrants to become UK citizens

#### Arguments For

- Migrants who become citizens are more likely to have a sense of belonging and participate fully in society.
- Having the vote will make it more likely politicians take their views into account.
- At present, citizenship fees are higher than the cost of processing the applications, and can be too expensive for some migrants, especially families where more than one person is applying.

#### Arguments Against

- Citizenship is a privilege to be earned. People should demonstrate that they are well integrated and committed to life in the UK – including its culture and values before they are given the rights of citizenship.
- High fees ensure the immigration system as a whole is self-funding without support from the taxpayer.

### OPTION 2: Make it harder for migrants to become UK citizens

#### Arguments For

- May encourage people to integrate better. They would have to learn English to a higher level.
- A tougher citizenship test should ensure that new citizens share 'British values' and understand British ways of life.

#### Arguments Against

- Will reduce social integration, excluding people who already have the right to live here permanently from full membership of society.
- If there are large numbers of long term residents who cannot vote, politicians will have no incentive to take their views in to account.