

# The increasingly hostile environment to immigration is unjust and short-sighted

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*The government's efforts to bring down net migration have had significant negative impacts on migrants in the UK and those seeking to come here, writes **Ruth Grove-White**. She argues that treating immigration as a numbers game, to be dealt with through increasingly tough measures felt at the community level, is a short-sighted approach.*



As the 2015 general election draws closer, the position of migrants in the UK political debate looks increasingly dismal. It is still at least eight months before party manifesto documents can be expected to be released, but if the debate thus far is anything to go by there seems little chance that we will see an inspiring range of policy ideas brought forward to tackle this most complex of areas.

This is unsurprising, perhaps, given the current political landscape. The UKIP threat looming large after their strong showing in the 2014 local and European elections has increased the pressure on the three mainstream parties to talk tough on immigration. Whilst backbenchers from across the political parties complain about the implications of an anti-immigration tone, hostile messaging on immigration is regularly echoed on the frontbenches of Labour, Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. Most recently, prime minister [David Cameron](#) and Lib Dem leader [Nick Clegg](#) laid out their views on immigration in separate interventions, with both choosing to emphasise tough measures on immigration as the key tools in their box of policy tricks for the coming period.

For many organisations across the UK working with migrant communities, however, the current approach leaves a lot to be desired. Under the current government, policy reforms since 2010 have largely been designed in pursuit of the Conservatives' 2010 manifesto objective of driving down annual levels of net immigration to the 'tens, rather than the hundreds, of thousands'. Whilst a reductive policy objective has strong public support (around 75 per cent favour this approach), in practice this has been significantly more difficult to achieve due to the unpredictability of both European immigration levels and emigration of British citizens. The latest statistics showed net migration at 212,000 at the end of 2013, a relatively small reduction from the historical peak of 252,000 for 2010, the year when the coalition government came into power.

The government's efforts to bring down net migration, despite their limited success, have had significant impacts on migrants in the UK and those seeking to come here, in particular from outside the European Economic Area (EEA). The government has introduced a blistering series of rule changes across visa categories for non-EEA nationals, tightening the rule for those coming here to work, study or reunite with family members.



Economic migration from outside the European Union was the first area of major reform, with the immigration route for highly skilled migrants to come to the UK in search of a job closed, and a new annual cap on visas to skilled migrants with a job offer introduced. The minimum skills level for non-EEA migrants coming to work in the UK was raised from National Qualifications Framework level 4 to level 6 (degree-level), and rules introduced requiring workers wishing to apply for settlement in the UK from April 2016 to be earning at least £35,000 per annum. A new, more demanding system for employers was also put in place, requiring them to register with the home office as official 'sponsors'.

The rules relating to international students also underwent big changes, with universities and colleges, similarly to employers, required to register with the home office as 'sponsors' in order to take on students from outside the EEA. The language requirement for international students was raised and new measures restricting their ability to bring dependents to live with them in the UK were introduced. Perhaps most controversially, however, the government closed the Post Study Work route, which had previously allowed graduates a two year period within which to find a job in the UK – this generated widespread concern that the UK was reducing its attractiveness as a destination for the lucrative international student market. In 2013, for the first time in 29 years, the number of international students coming to the UK dropped. Certain nationalities appear to have been affected more than others by these changes with, for example, the number of students coming from Commonwealth countries including India and Pakistan declining from 100,000 to 35,000 over the past three years.

Economic and student migration have not been the only visa categories to see significant changes. Since July 2012, new rules for family migration have introduced a fixed income requirement of £18,600 for British citizens and permanent residents seeking to bring their non-EU spouses to live with them in the UK. This is a significant increase on the previous requirement, and is anticipated by the government that it will affect up to 17,800 families once the rules take full effect. This is a rule which is particularly hurting lower-income workers in the UK – [researchers at Oxford University](#) estimate that £18,600 is an earnings level higher than that of 47 per cent of the British working population. The new rules are currently undergoing a major legal challenge on human rights grounds which is expected to be heard in the Supreme Court in 2015.

The impacts of the fast-changing policy agenda on immigration have not been limited to the visa categories for entry and stay. Irregular migrants living in the UK have been a target for ongoing government action, with ministers keen to extend immigration enforcement mechanisms across local communities in order to create a 'hostile environment' for this group. As such, the [Immigration Act 2014](#), whose measures are yet to come into force, will introduce new mandatory immigration document checks for private landlords of prospective tenants, prior to signing tenancy agreements. It also introduces similar checks within banks, building societies and the DVLA which aim to screen out irregular migrants from receiving related services, but which could result in wider racial discrimination against a range of other clients. In a move which will affect all migrants, regardless of immigration status, the Act will remove the right of appeal for the majority of immigration and nationality applications, greatly reducing the ability of applicants to redress poor home office decision-making. The impacts of this will be intensified by ongoing cuts to legal aid for immigration cases, which make it more difficult for many applicants to secure good quality advice in the first place.

Increasing the presence of immigration controls within local communities has been controversial. The government has been accused of sending an inappropriately negative message to ethnic minority communities in the UK through its approach to immigration. Heavy-handed home office enforcement initiatives have been rolled out – most notably [Operation Vaken](#) which, in the summer of 2013, stirred widespread protest by driving vans with messages urging irregular migrants to 'go home' around six ethnically mixed London boroughs. Vaken, presented by the home office as a pilot prior to wider roll-out, was [described](#) by migrant community activists as "a travesty of justice, it incites racial hatred and it inflames community tensions". After threats of legal action, the home office decided not to extend the operation. However, an ongoing series of local enforcement initiatives continue to take place and, in some cases, to attract [accusations](#) of racial profiling.

Although immigration is set to remain in the headlines over the coming period, it is unlikely that the public debate will forefront the views of migrant communities on the changes that have affected them, and the alternatives they would like to see. This may turn out to be short-sighted since available data suggests that a substantial number of migrant voters (including [naturalised British citizens](#) and [Commonwealth](#) voters), as well as the UK's established ethnic minority population, will be eligible to cast a vote in the 2015 general election. Analysis [suggests](#) that migrants and those with migrant heritage are more positive about immigration and its impacts on the UK, and that anti-immigration messaging and policies can [play badly](#) with some minority communities.

It would be wise for politicians to consider more deeply how the impacts of the current policy approach look to the UK's migrant populations, which could have more of an influence next May than is currently realised. In this light, treating immigration as a numbers game, to be dealt with through increasingly tough measures felt at the community level, looks increasingly like a short-sighted approach from our political leaders. They may find it makes sense to have a rethink.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. Both images credit of the [UK Home Office](#) CC BY 2.0*

## About the Author

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