

Restrictive immigration policies are in the pipeline – but the UK has already lost its charm



The prospect of Brexit has already made the UK a less attractive option for new EU migrants, according to the latest statistics. What is set to make the country an even less attractive destination is the government's new immigration policy, writes [Heather Rolfe](#).

As Theresa May faces a show-down in Parliament and tours the UK in a 'charm offensive', she is expected to turn to immigration to gain support for her deal. The Immigration White Paper may finally be published in December to assist this refocus. But the [latest migration statistics](#) indicate serious challenges are ahead. Net migration of EU migrants is now at its lowest level since 2012. [Employers are reporting serious labour and skills shortages](#) and two reports out this week by [NIESR](#) and [UK in a Changing Europe](#) indicate that reduced migration will contribute to the damage resulting from May's deal. Repeated announcements that free movement will end have undoubtedly made other EU destinations, or staying put, more appealing. Theresa May might be advised to include EU migrants in her charm offensive. Yet [leaked proposals for new immigration policy](#) would appear to make the UK an even less attractive option and may end up suiting no-one.

What can we expect from new immigration policy?

It's no surprise that the leaked papers show plans to welcome only highly skilled migrants – the 'brightest and best' – and to place tight restrictions on the flow of 'low-skilled'. This is what the [Migration Advisory Committee recommended](#), with its narrow focus on fiscal contribution rather than the needs of the economy or employers. But the leaked proposals suggest the Government is adding its own objective of reducing the number of migrants who show up in the statistics because they stay less than 12 months. These new 11 month visas may help to achieve the Conservative's long-standing target of reducing net migration to below 100,000. But will they be welcomed by employers? Will they address public concerns? And will they be attractive to migrants?

Employers need lower skilled migrants as part of a stable workforce

The leaked report is said to include both 11-month visas and a two-year 18-30 programme, similar to the MAC's proposal for an extended youth mobility scheme. Both are essentially temporary schemes, which employers consistently say would not meet their needs. [Our research with employers](#) in sectors including hospitality, food processing and social care finds consistently that employers want longer term arrangements – not students on a gap year. High staff turnover is costly and bad for productivity: even low skilled jobs include a period of training and familiarisation before a worker is fully productive. Employers also want people who can progress to management positions. And [they worry about policing short-term visas](#) and the financial and reputational damage of unintended infringements.

The public are more interested in contribution than numbers or skills

During her [BBC Radio 5 phone-in](#) last Friday the Prime Minister referred to public concerns about free movement. In the coming weeks she's likely to emphasise that her deal and new policies will 'take back control of our borders'. But what does the public mean when it talks about control? And are the new visas likely to address their concerns?

[Our recent research](#) in a Leave voting area of Kent found that support for greater control is based on a desire to restrict the entry of perceived low-quality migrants. But 'quality' is not conceived in relation to qualifications and skills, but more widely in terms of economic need and, most importantly, contribution. Our participants recognised the need for lower skilled migration. They wanted control to help ensure that people come to contribute through work or study, rather than to claim benefits or to commit crime.

Our focus group participants expressed particular concern about short-term visas fearing that they would not be enforced and that people would 'disappear' from the official labour market once their visas expire. They believed that many migrants already work 'below the radar' and that temporary visas would increase this practice. Opportunities for integration would also be limited, as [British Future](#) frequently points out. Participants in its [National Conversation](#) programme gave temporary visas the thumbs down for this reason. Widespread use of temporary visas is likely to limit migrants' ability to contribute and integrate in ways which the public values.

And let's not forget migrants themselves

But as the latest migration statistics should remind us, we should also be considering the viewpoint of migrants themselves. With their 'restricted entitlements and rights', which might include access to services, the right to bring dependents or to move jobs, how attractive will 11-month visas be to them? It seems unlikely that they will attract EU migrants who can choose to go where they will be treated equally and not as second class citizens. The terms of youth mobility visas may be less restricted and could appeal to students on a gap year, or two, but many may be deterred by the restrictions. For many, just the end of the simple and easy system of free movement may be enough of a deterrent, as the latest figures seem to be saying.

About the Author



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