MIGRATION WATCH

FROM CONTROL TO DEPENDENCE

A REVIEW OF THE WORK VISA SYSTEM

MIGRATION WATCH

WORK VISA REPORT

Contents

Foreword

For more than twenty years, Migration Watch has argued that immigration policy must be judged not by the promises made when a new system is introduced, but by what that system actually delivers. Few areas illustrate that principle more clearly than work migration.

The history set out in this report is one of repeated reform, repeated assurances of greater control, and repeated expansion. From the old work-permit system, through the Points-Based System introduced in 2008, to the post-Brexit framework established in 2020, successive governments have altered the machinery of labour migration while leaving the fundamental question unresolved: how many people should Britain admit for work, on what terms, and with what consequences for settlement and population growth?

Brexit should have provided an opportunity to answer that question afresh. The end of free movement meant that, for the first time in decades, Parliament had the ability to determine the rules governing labour migration from both Europe and the rest of the world. Yet the system that emerged was not, in practice, one of tighter numerical control. Skill thresholds were reduced, the resident labour market test was removed, sponsorship was widened and major new routes were created or expanded.

This matters not simply because of the headline numbers. Work migration has increasingly become a route to long-term residence. In 2023, dependants outnumbered main applicants on worker visas, while large cohorts admitted since 2020 are now moving towards eligibility for permanent settlement. The report estimates that the effects of the post-2020 expansion will therefore continue to be felt long after annual visa issuance begins to fall.

There is also a wider economic question. A country which repeatedly responds to shortages by recruiting overseas risks avoiding harder decisions about training, wages, productivity and workforce planning at home. In health and social care in particular, reliance on international recruitment has become embedded rather than exceptional.

This report therefore looks beyond the political slogans and examines what happened in practice: who came, through which routes, from which countries, in what numbers, and with what likelihood of remaining permanently.

The task now is to decide what genuine control should mean. Migration Watch's proposals, including firm caps, tighter eligibility, stronger domestic labour safeguards and a clearer distinction between temporary work and settlement, are intended to provide one answer to that question.

Key Points

- A Structural Post-Covid Surge: ***Work visas increased from roughly 120,000 in 2019–20 to over 600,000 in 2023***, before easing to around 400,000 in 2024. This represents a permanent upward shift rather than a temporary spike. The post-Brexit Points-Based System materially expanded eligibility and sponsorship, creating a new, higher baseline of work-related migration that is historically unprecedented in scale.

- Health and Care Dominance: ***The Health and Care Worker visa has issued nearly 710,000 grants since 2020*** and now accounts for over half of work visas. What began as a pandemic response evolved into a structural recruitment model for the NHS and social care. This reflects sustained domestic training shortfalls and has embedded long-term reliance on overseas labour in publicly funded services.

- Dependants Overtook Main Applicants: In 2023, dependants (about 260,000) exceeded main worker applicants (about 225,000), producing ***a dependency ratio of 1.16 per worker***. This is historically unprecedented. The work route increasingly operates as a family migration channel rather than a narrowly defined labour pathway, substantially increasing its demographic impact even where main applicant numbers stabilise.

- Narrowing Source Countries: Work migration has shifted decisively away from Europe toward India, Nigeria, Pakistan, and the Philippines. ***India alone has received over 1.4 million work visas since 2005***. This concentration increases Britain's exposure to economic or political shocks in a small number of countries and represents a fundamental geopolitical reorientation of labour supply.

- A Built-In Settlement Pipeline: Cohorts admitted between 2020 and 2024 are ***projected to generate roughly 384,000 Indefinite Leave to Remain grants between 2025 and 2029***, even under moderate assumptions. This guarantees elevated settlement levels regardless of short-term reductions in visa issuance, embedding long-term population growth through previously admitted work migrants.

Key Recommendations

- **Impose Hard Caps on Work Visas:** Introduce firm annual caps on Skilled Worker and Health and Care Worker routes, with monthly Certificate of Sponsorship allocations. Visa numbers should no longer expand automatically in response to employer demand, but operate within a fixed national ceiling aligned with overall migration reduction targets.

- **Restrict Dependants on Work Routes:** Retain and extend the 2024 dependant restrictions. Options include banning dependants below defined salary thresholds, counting dependants against sponsor allocations, or applying separate caps. The work route should not function as a de facto family migration pathway.

- **Restore Stricter Eligibility Criteria:** Reverse the post-2020 lowering of skill and salary thresholds. Re-establish tighter qualification requirements and ensure lower-wage roles do not provide settlement pathways. Work visas should return to being genuinely skilled and economically exceptional routes.

- **Reinstate Domestic Labour Safeguards:** Reintroduce a rigorous Resident Labour Market Test, requiring verified evidence that UK recruitment has been exhausted. Link visa allocations to demonstrable investment in domestic training and apprenticeships to reduce structural dependence on overseas labour.

- **Reform Settlement and Enforcement Mechanisms:** Tighten compliance through stronger HMRC–Home Office coordination, revoke licences for abusive sponsors, and address the ILR pipeline by extending qualifying periods or restricting automatic progression to settlement.

Introduction

The United Kingdom's work visa system has undergone repeated reinvention over the past quarter century. From the patchwork of pre-2008 work permits, through the Points-Based System of 2008, to the post-Brexit framework introduced in 2020, each reform has been presented as a restoration of control. Yet the trajectory of the data tells a different story. Far from narrowing, work-related migration has expanded in scale, scope and permanence. What was once described as a targeted mechanism for filling genuine skills gaps has become one of the principal engines of long-term population growth.

The most dramatic change has occurred since the end of free movement and the introduction of the "new" Points-Based System. Between 2021 and 2023, work visa grants rose from levels broadly consistent with the previous decade to over 600,000 per year, the highest figures in modern British history. Although numbers eased in 2024, they remain far above the pre-Brexit norm. This was not a statistical anomaly caused by Covid alone. It was the product of policy design: reduced skill thresholds, expanded sponsorship powers, and the rapid scaling-up of sector-specific routes, particularly in health and social care.

At the same time, the character of work migration has shifted. The system now rests heavily on a small number of sectors and a narrow group of source countries. Health and care roles dominate the Skilled Worker route, while agriculture accounts for much of the temporary route. India, Nigeria, Pakistan and the Philippines have emerged as the principal suppliers of labour. This concentration creates structural dependency. British public services and key industries now rely on sustained inflows from specific regions of the world, leaving the domestic economy exposed to external economic or political disruption.

Equally significant is the transformation of the work route into a settlement pathway. In 2023, dependants overtook main applicants under worker visas, meaning that more family members than workers entered via this channel. Five-year residence rules ensure that large cohorts admitted since 2020 will become eligible for Indefinite Leave to Remain between 2025 and 2029. Even if visa grants were reduced tomorrow, the settlement pipeline created by past decisions would continue to generate permanent migration for years to come.

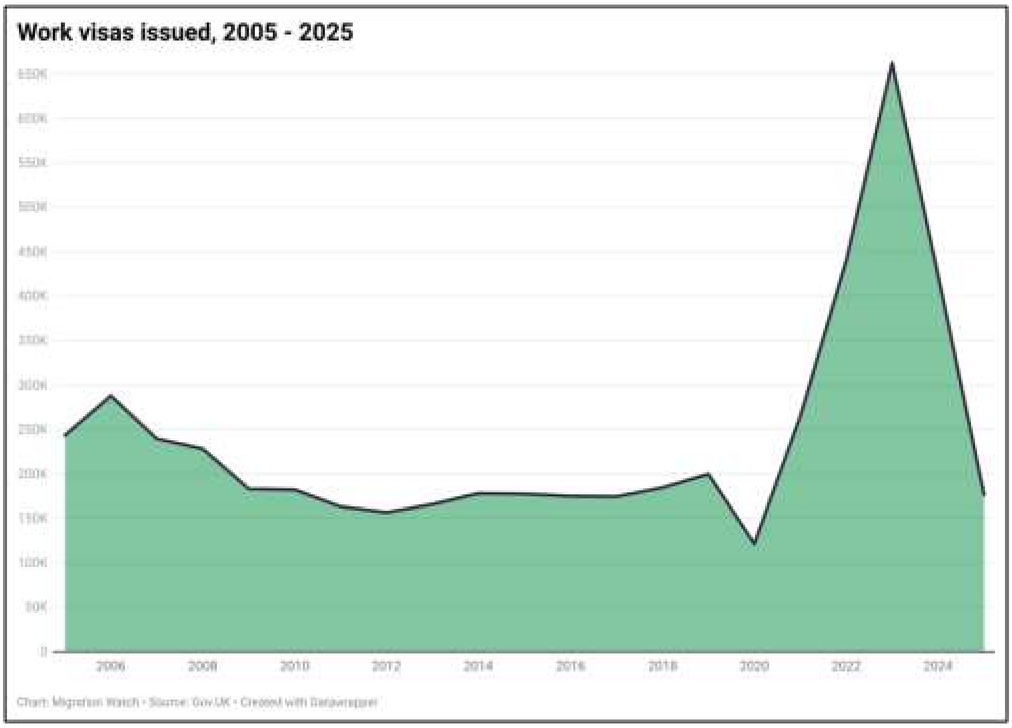
This report examines how that transformation occurred. **Section One** traces the evolution of work visas since 2000, detailing the expansion and consolidation of routes. **Section Two** analyses the raw numbers from 2005 to 2025, identifying the key inflection points. **Section Three** explores national origin patterns and the growth of dependants. **Section Four** examines the post-2020 surge (termed the "Boriswave") and its structural consequences. **Section Five** assesses the long-term demographic implications, particularly the emerging settlement wave.

The evidence is clear: Britain's work visa regime has moved from discretionary labour management to institutionalised expansion. The challenge now is not whether the system can operate at scale (it demonstrably can) but whether it can be recalibrated to restore genuine control over both numbers and permanence.

To that end, this report advances a set of proposals designed to shift the system from demand-led expansion to controlled, skills-based labour management. Central among these is the introduction of firm annual caps on the main work routes, particularly the Skilled Worker and Health and Care Worker visas, administered through controlled allocations of Certificates of Sponsorship. Alongside caps, the report calls for tighter restrictions on dependants to prevent the work route from functioning as a de facto family migration channel. It recommends restoring stricter skill and salary thresholds, reintroducing a rigorous Resident Labour Market Test, and linking employer sponsorship to demonstrable domestic training investment. Finally, it proposes strengthened compliance mechanisms and reforms to settlement eligibility to address the substantial Indefinite Leave to Remain pipeline already embedded in the system. Together, these measures are intended to realign work migration with economic necessity rather than institutional convenience.

Section 1
Who Receives Work Visas?

The United Kingdom's immigration system, composed of varied types of visas, has been continually reinvented and, of those visa types, few areas have seen as much consistent restructuring as the work visa regime. From the last years of the pre-points-based era, through the Blair-era experiments in labour mobility, the 2008 Points-Based System (PBS) revolution, and the post-Brexit re-foundation of 2020, successive governments have redefined what it means to come to Britain to work - and who can.



This first section outlines every principal work visa sub-route that has existed since 2000, noting when each was introduced, whether it is still in operation, the eligibility framework that applied (language, income, sponsorship), the duration of stay typically permitted, and whether the route provided a path to settlement or could be converted into other forms of leave. It is a picture of two-and-a-half decades of oscillation between intentional liberalisation and attempted control, often within the same administrative framework.

The Patchwork Pre-PBS Landscape

At the turn of the millennium, Britain's immigration system remained an assortment of legacy work-permit schemes and discretionary programmes inherited from the 1990s. The principle visas that allowed entry to the United Kingdom, prior to 2008, were as follows:

- Work Permit Scheme (abolished 2008)
- Training and Work Experience Scheme (closed 2008)
- Working Holidaymaker visa (closed 2008)
- Highly Skilled Migrant Programme (launched 2002, abolished 2008)

The **Work Permit Scheme**, which had existed since the 1940s and re-codified in the late 1990s, allowed employers to sponsor foreign workers for specific jobs. It required proof that no suitable British or EU candidate could be found; a process of labour-market testing that became the model for later "sponsorship" concepts. The permit was normally valid for up to five years and renewable, and in time could lead to permanent residence. It was finally abolished in 2008, replaced by Tier 2 of the PBS.

Alongside it were a handful of targeted schemes. **The Training and Work Experience Scheme (TWES)** allowed temporary placements for trainees and young professionals, generally for twelve months, but it offered no route to settlement and was closed in 2008. The **Working Holidaymaker** visa, introduced decades earlier but modernised under the Labour government, permitted Commonwealth citizens aged 17-30 to live and work in the UK for up to two years. It too was closed in November 2008, reborn as the Youth Mobility Scheme under Tier 5[1].

At the high-skill end, the early 2000s brought Britain's first experiment in points-based self-assessment: the **Highly Skilled Migrant Programme (HSMP)**, launched in 2002. Applicants were judged on education, earnings, and experience rather than a specific job offer. It allowed free movement within the UK labour market and, most importantly, could lead to indefinite leave to remain (ILR) after five years. Partially successful, it laid the foundations for the entire Points-Based System. In part due to

1 Temporary Workers And Youth Mobility Under The Points Based System- (Tier 5) Statement Of Intent, UK Border Agency

www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/sitecontent/documents/managingourborders/pbsdocs/statementofintent/temporaryworkersunderpbs.pdf?

perceived abuses, however, and a failed attempt by the government to change the basis for granting the visa retrospectively was successfully challenged in court.

2 *Skilled Migrants Win Right To Stay As Judge Says Rule Change Unlawful, The Guardian*

www.theguardian.com/uk/2008/apr/09/immigration.immigrationpolicy

In addition to these primary routes to entry, the pre-PBS era also saw an odd array of graduate and regional experiments. The **Science and Engineering Graduates Scheme (SEGS)**, created in 2004, allowed recent STEM graduates of UK universities to remain for one year to seek work; it became the **International Graduates Scheme (IGS)** in 2007, then folded into the PBS. Scotland briefly ran its own version - the **Fresh Talent: Working in Scotland Scheme** (2005–2008) - granting two years' post-study work to non-EU graduates. All were abolished when the PBS came into force.

The Points-Based System (2008-2020): Hierarchy and Consolidation

In November 2008, the Home Office unveiled what it called a single, rational Points-Based System, intended to simplify the growing list of entry routes into five "tiers". In reality, the system proliferated new sub-categories and became the foundation of a decade of incremental change.

Tier 1: High-Skill and Business Routes

Tier 1 absorbed HSMP and the graduate routes, setting the pattern for highly skilled, unsponsored migration[3]. Over time, it included:

3 *Statement Of Changes To The Immigration Rules: HC 1919, 7 March 2019, Home Office*

www.gov.uk/government/publications/statement-of-changes-to-the-immigration-rules-hc-1919-7-march-2019

- **Tier 1 (General):** open to those scoring enough points for qualifications, income and age; closed to new applicants in 2010–11.
- **Tier 1 (Post-Study Work):** the direct successor to IGS, allowing graduates two years' unrestricted work; abolished in 2012 amid fears of abuse.
- **Tier 1 (Entrepreneur):** created in 2008 for business founders investing £200,000 or more; replaced in 2019 by the **Innovator visa**.

- **Tier 1 (Investor):** for high-net-worth individuals investing at least £1 million, later £2 million; closed to new entrants in 2022.
- **Tier 1 (Graduate Entrepreneur):** added in 2012, replaced by the **Start-up visa** in 2019.
- **Tier 1 (Exceptional Talent):** launched in 2011 for internationally recognised leaders; replaced by **Global Talent** in February 2020[4].

Most Tier 1 routes offered an initial grant of three years, renewable to five, and could lead to settlement, though Entrepreneurs and Investors had accelerated ILR paths (three years if investment or revenue targets were met). The entire Tier 1 family is now closed.

Tier 2: Sponsored Skilled Work

Tier 2 replaced the old work-permit system and became the dominant long-term work route. It consisted of:

- **Tier 2 (General):** the core skilled route, requiring a Certificate of Sponsorship (CoS), a minimum salary threshold, and English at level B1. It granted up to five years' stay and led to ILR after five.
- **Tier 2 (Intra-Company Transfer):** for staff transferred within multinational firms; led to extensions but not settlement after the 2010 reforms.
- **Tier 2 (Minister of Religion):** for faith workers, leading to settlement after five years.
- **Tier 2 (Sportsperson):** for elite athletes and coaches, also leading to ILR after five years.

Crucially, Tier 2 introduced the language of sponsorship that defines the current system: employers required Home Office licences, issued Certificates of Sponsorship to individuals, and were subject to compliance audits. The 2010 Coalition government tightened salary thresholds and capped annual certificates at 20,700 in 2011, embedding the category's status as a controlled migration route.

4 *Global Talent, Home Office*

assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6a6b1b930ddb7e4831c62a0f/Global_talent.pdf

Tier 5: Temporary Work and Youth Routes

Tier 5 encompassed a wide array of short-term categories:

- Creative and Sporting
- Charity Worker
- Religious Worker
- Government Authorised Exchange
- International Agreement
- Youth Mobility Scheme

Most of these visa sub-types granted stays of six to twenty-four months, rarely leading to settlement. The Youth Mobility Scheme, which replaced the old Working Holidaymaker, survives today as a bilateral exchange route for young people.

Outside the numbered tiers sat several specialist routes. The Representative of an Overseas Business (Sole Representative) visa, introduced in 2008, allowed a senior employee to open a UK branch; it led to settlement after five years and remained popular until it was closed in April 2022. The Domestic Worker in a Private Household visa was truncated in 2012, capping new entrants to six months and ending their path to ILR. Meanwhile the UK Ancestry visa - a Commonwealth route predating 1971 - endured as a five-year route to settlement, still in force today[5].

***5** UK Ancestry Visa, gov.uk*

gov.uk/ancestry-visa

The Post-Brexit Realignment: The “New” Immigration System, 2020-2025

The end of free movement in December 2020 forced the government to rebuild the work visa system from first principles. The Home Office’s December 2020 framework (still referred to informally as the “new Points-Based System”) simplified the tiers but introduced new sub-routes that often mirrored the old.

Skilled Worker (Replacing Tier 2 General)

After Brexit was implemented, there was inevitably a discussion over the replacement of free movement, guaranteed by European Union membership. Launched on 1 December 2020, the **Skilled Worker** route was intended to define the future of labour movement in and out of the country, by removing the resident-labour-market test and reducing the skill threshold to RQF 3 (A-level equivalent)[6].

As this framework is still in effect applicants require:

- A job offer from a licensed sponsor
- English at level B1
- A salary at least £41,700 or the market rate for the role
- Proof of maintenance funds

Leave is granted for up to five years at a time and is extendable indefinitely. The route leads to ILR after five years of continuous residence.

A sub-route, the **Health and Care Worker visa**, introduced in 2020, uses the same structure but is reserved for healthcare and adult social-care roles. It waives the Immigration Health Surcharge and has become one of the largest single inflows of workers since the pandemic, with nearly 710,000 visas issued in this sub-route since its introduction.

Global Talent

Replacing **Tier 1 (Exceptional Talent)** in February 2020, this route allows leaders or potential leaders in academia, science, culture, or technology to enter without sponsorship, subject to endorsement by one of six official bodies, such as UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)[7]. It grants flexible leave of up to five years, renewable, and offers settlement after three years for recognised leaders or five for potential leaders.

Scale-Up Worker

Introduced in August 2022, this hybrid route allows high-growth companies to sponsor employees for at least six months at a salary of £36,300 or more[8]. It is worth noting that, at the time of the visa being introduced, the average salary in the UK was estimated at £33,061. After the six months period, migrants can change employers without a new certificate, a degree of freedom

6 *UK Points-Based Immigration System: Further Details Statement, Home Office*

gov.uk/government/publications/uk-points-based-immigration-system-further-details-statement/uk-points-based-immigration-system-further-details-statement

7 *Global Talent Endorsing Bodies, UK Visas and Immigration*

gov.uk/government/publications/global-talent-endorsing-bodies

8 *Scale-Up Worker Visa, gov.uk*

gov.uk/scale-up-worker-visa

absent from Skilled Worker. It leads to settlement after five years, provided earnings remain above threshold.

Innovator Founder

Unveiled in April 2023, this merged and replaced the **Innovator** (2019) and **Start-up** (2019) visas[9]. It requires endorsement from an approved body confirming that the applicant's business idea is "innovative, viable, and scalable". English at B2 and maintenance funds are required. The visa is granted for three years and can lead directly to settlement after that period if business performance criteria are met.

Global Business Mobility (GBM) Routes

In April 2022, the government consolidated the company-transfer and contractual-service routes under the **Global Business Mobility** umbrella, creating five sub-routes[10].

- **Senior or Specialist Worker** (successor to **Intra-Company Transfer**),
- **Graduate Trainee**,
- **UK Expansion Worker** (replacing Sole Representative),
- **Service Supplier** (for contract-based work),
- **Secondment Worker** (for cross-border project work).

GBM visas typically last 12–24 months, extendable up to five years in six, but do not themselves lead to ILR.

Temporary and Sector-Specific Routes

The 2020s have seen an expansion of temporary work channels. The **Creative Worker**, **Charity Worker**, **Religious Worker**, and **Government Authorised Exchange** visas were re-named under the "**Temporary Work**" heading in 2021. All are short-term, usually up to twelve or twenty-four months, and do not count toward settlement[11]. The **Seasonal Worker** visa, piloted in 2019 for agriculture, remains in place with annual quotas[12].

9 *Explanatory Memorandum to the Statement of Changes in Immigration Rules Presented to Parliament on 9th March 2023, gov.uk*

assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6408b793d3bf7f25ed3f58c9/E02875509_-__HC_1160__-_EXPLANATORY_MEMORANDUM__Web_Accessible_.pdf?

10 *Statement of Changes to the Immigration Rules, March 2022, gov.uk*

gov.uk/government/publications/statement-of-changes-to-the-immigration-rules-hc-1118-15-march-2022

11 *Statement of Changes to the Immigration Rules, Sept 2021, gov.uk*

gov.uk/government/publications/statement-of-changes-to-the-immigration-rules-hc-617-10-september-2021

12 *Seasonal Workers Pilot Opens, March 2019, gov.uk*

gov.uk/government/news/seasonal-workers-pilot-opens

The International Sportsperson route, introduced October 2021, merged the Tier 2 and Tier 5 sporting categories. It grants elite athletes and coaches up to five years' leave and a direct ILR path[13].

Graduate and High-Potential Routes

Post-study work returned in July 2021 as the Graduate visa, offering two years (three for PhDs) of unsponsored employment to international graduates of UK institutions[14]. It does not lead directly to ILR but allows switching into qualifying routes. The High Potential Individual visa, launched in May 2022 (Home Office, 2022d), extends a similar privilege to graduates of top global universities; it grants two years' stay (three for doctorates) and is non-extendable, though holders may switch into Skilled Worker or other long-term routes[15].

Faith and Legacy Routes

The T2 Minister of Religion visa continues unchanged, providing a five-year path to settlement for clergy and faith leaders. A small number of legacy routes (ECAA Turkish Worker and Businessperson, and the pre-2012 Domestic Worker cohort) persist for extension or ILR purposes but are effectively closed to new entrants[16].

Settlement and Conversion

Across twenty-five years, the central question in work immigration has remained whether a route confers a pathway to permanence. The answer has narrowed; indeed, as the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) has recently pointed out in their report "Who Stays, Who Leaves?", stay rates have increased year-on-year since 2014, now reaching 85% after five years for the 2019 cohort[17]. Under the pre-2008 and early PBS systems, nearly every long-term work visa counted toward ILR after five years. Today, only a handful do: Skilled Worker, Health and Care Worker, Scale-up, Global Talent, Innovator Founder, Minister of Religion, and UK Ancestry. Others - notably GBM, Creative Worker, Charity Worker, and Seasonal Worker - are explicitly temporary[18].

13 *Fast-Track Routes for Gifted Stars to Come to the UK, Sept 2021*

gov.uk/government/news/fast-track-routes-for-gifted-stars-to-come-to-the-uk

14 *Graduate Route for Best and Brightest Launches, July 2021, gov.uk*

gov.uk/government/news/graduate-route-for-best-and-brightest-launches

15 *Points Based System Welcomes Highly Skilled Graduates to the UK, May 2022*

gov.uk/government/news/points-based-system-welcomes-high-skilled-graduates-to-uk

16 *Overseas Domestic Worker Visa, gov.uk*

gov.uk/overseas-domestic-worker-visa/domestic-workers-who-applied-before-5-april-2012

17 *Who Stays, Who Leaves? Migration Advisory Committee, May 2026*

gov.uk/government/publications/who-stays-who-leaves-evidence-from-the-skilled-worker-route

18 *Immigration Rules, Feb 2016, gov.uk*

gov.uk/guidance/immigration-rules/immigration-rules-appendix-continuous-residence

Yet the ability to switch between routes has encouraged flexibility. Holders of temporary or post-study visas can apply from within the UK to move into ILR-qualifying categories if they meet the relevant thresholds. Thus, while the number of permanent routes has shrunk, the permeability of the system has increased; if a visa holder is capable of switching easily between routes, then it is possible (indeed, it has happened frequently) that visa-holders on temporary routes can switch to permanent routes with little friction.

The default residence requirement for settlement has historically been five continuous years, with absences limited to 180 days per twelve-month period, plus English (usually level B1 or higher) and the Life in the UK test. Under the government's 2025 immigration White Paper proposals, that threshold may rise to ten years for most workers, with an "earned settlement" option for higher earners - signalling yet another swing in the policy pendulum[19].

19 *Restoring Control Over the Immigration System, May 2025, gov.uk*

gov.uk/government/publications/restoring-control-over-the-immigration-system-white-paper

Patterns and Implications

Looking back over the period since 2000, three spontaneous, unplanned patterns stand out amid persistent tensions between a desire for economic openness and numerical control.

First, the British work-visa system has evolved from discretionary judgement to bureaucratic calibration. The pre-PBS model relied on immigration officers to make case-by-case decisions which ensured a greater degree of control; thereafter, the PBS introduced quantified points; and then the post-Brexit system has retained formal criteria but re-introduced political levers such as occupation lists, salary thresholds, and annual caps.

Second, every attempt at simplification has produced, ironically, greater complexity. The 2008 PBS replaced over 80 schemes with five tiers[20], yet each tier spawned multiple sub-routes. The 2020 "simplified" framework collapsed the tiers but now includes more than thirty named routes and sub-routes[21].

Third, the link between work and settlement has been deliberately narrowed. Early-2000s schemes treated residence as a reward for contribution; today's approach treats temporary migration as the norm, with settlement conditional on income and continuity. The shift reflects broader demographic and political pressures rather than administrative preference.

Since 2000, the United Kingdom has cycled through three distinct immigration philosophies. The early 2000s sought to attract global talent; the 2010s sought to control it; the 2020s aim to differentiate it — distinguishing short-term labour mobility from long-term migration.

What remains constant is the centrality of work visas to the shape of Britain's population and economy. They are both the engine of legal migration and the barometer of political sentiment toward it. In that sense, every new sub-route (from the **Work Permit** of 2000 to the **Innovator Founder** of 2025) is less a discrete policy than a chapter in the same story: a state in permanent negotiation with its own borders.

20 *Migration Permanent Limit (Points Based System Tier 1 and Tier 2), March 2011, Home Office*

assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/257827/ia-pbs-t1-t2.pdf

21 *UK Points-Based Immigration System: Further Details Statement, August 2020, Home Office*

gov.uk/government/publications/uk-points-based-immigration-system-further-details-statement/uk-points-based-immigration-system-further-details-statement

Era / Route	Introduction	Current?	Typical Duration	Settlement path
Work Permit Scheme	pre-2008	x	up to 5 yrs	✓
HSMP	2002	x	2 + 3 yrs	✓
Tier 1 (General / Entrepreneur / Investor)	2008	x	3 + 2 yrs	✓
Tier 2 (General)	2008	x	5 yrs	✓
Skilled Worker	2020	✓	5 yrs	✓
Health & Care Worker	2020	✓	5 yrs	✓
Global Talent	2020	✓	3–5 yrs	✓
Scale-up Worker	2022	✓	2 + extensions	✓
Innovator Founder	2023	✓	3 yrs	✓
GBM (Senior / Specialist etc.)	2022	✓	12–24 mths	x
Creative / Charity / Religious Worker	2021	✓	up to 24 mths	x
Graduate	2021	✓	24–36 mths	x (switch only)
HPI	2022	✓	24–36 mths	x (switch only)
Youth Mobility	2008	✓	24 mths	x
International Sportsperson	2021	✓	up to 5 yrs	✓
Minister of Religion	2008 → current	✓	5 yrs	✓
UK Ancestry	1971 → current	✓	5 yrs	✓

Section 2
The Raw Numbers, 2005-2025

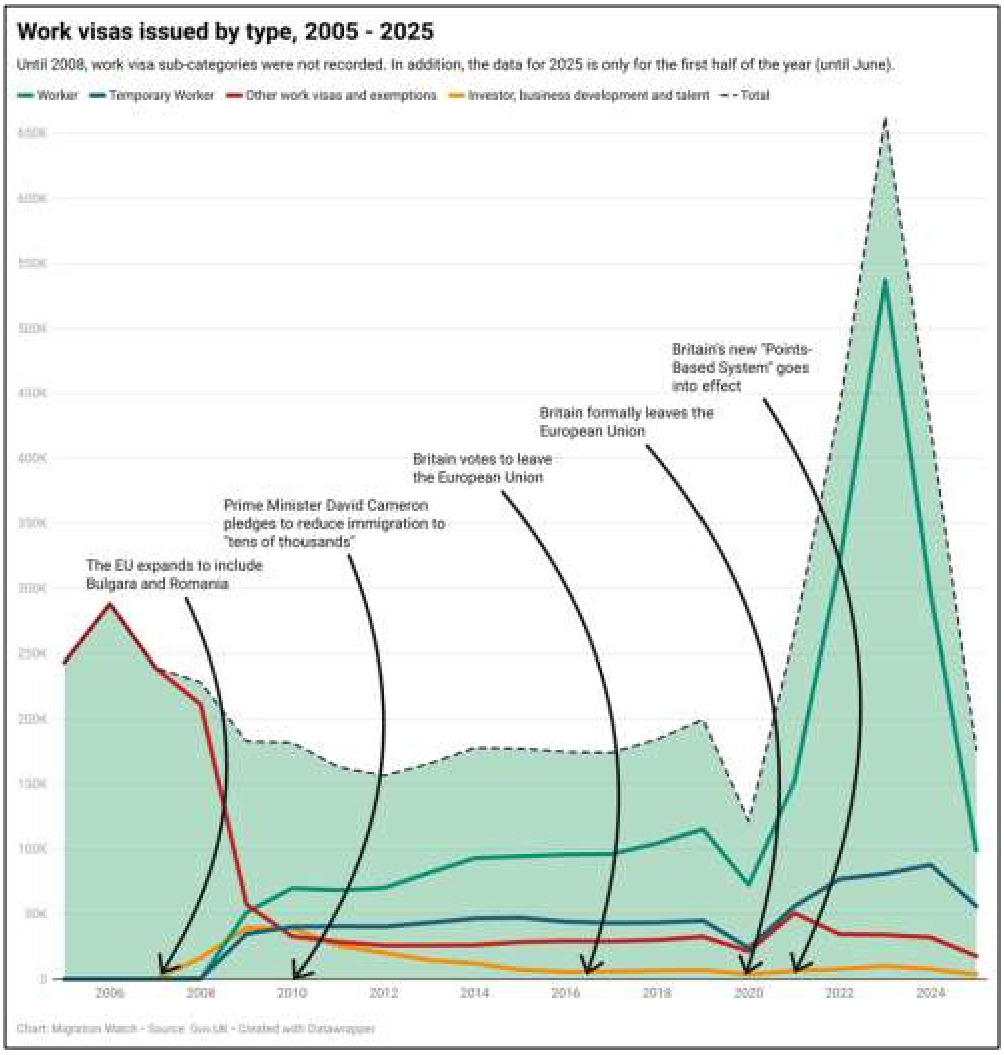


Figure 2: Work visas issued by type, 2005-2025

The UK's work visa landscape has significantly shifted over the past two decades, but the overall trend is obvious: an inability to assert control. After the mid-1990s, when net migration began permanently shifting into the positives, the mid-2000s witnessed a significant increase in the flow of foreign workers that, over time, became the norm and eventually one of the main engines of Britain's population growth. Of course, a significant reason for this is Britain's membership of the EU, and the free movement of labour that came with membership preventing the "tens of thousands" target at a systemic level. This was a major component of the Leave side of the Brexit campaign, that leaving the EU would allow for an opportunity to "take back control" over immigration policy.

The period from 2005 to 2025 can therefore be understood as a series of three major phases: the post-2008 contraction following the financial crisis and early tightening of immigration rules; the temporary Covid-era collapse in 2020; and the extraordinary surge after the pandemic, which marks the highest level of work-related migration in modern British history.

Together, these phases illustrate the movement of Britain's migration system from one of relative neglect to one of systemic expansion. This section examines how.

The Post-2008 Contraction and the Tightening of Controls

The first major inflection point occurs around 2008. The data in Figure 1 (see Section One) shows total work visas peaking just below 300,000 in 2006–2007, before falling sharply in the years that follow. This decline coincides with two major developments: the global financial crisis of 2008 and the political response to mounting public concern about immigration[22].

***22** Departmental Report, Home Office, May 2008*

assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7c7e4f40f0b62aff6c20fc/7396.pdf

Work visa sub-type, 2005 - 2007

The patchwork pre-Points Based System.

	Work visa type	2005	2006	2007
1	ECAA Businessperson	420	260	4
2	International Graduates Scheme	0	0	701
3	Minister of Religion, Missionary or Member of a Religious Order	950	849	794
4	Other permit free employment	45,193	51,733	44,171
5	Overseas Domestic Worker	17,118	18,168	16,797
6	Private Servants in Diplomatic Households	236	324	253
7	Religious Worker	3	1,525	1,133
8	UK Ancestry	10,142	9,742	8,381
9	Work Permit	110,939	120,873	94,166
10	Working Holidaymakers	58,423	46,129	39,390

Table: Migration Watch • Source: Gov.UK • Created with Datawrapper

Table 1: Sub-types of work visas in the pre-Points Based System, 2005 - 2007

As Section One details, prior to 2008 work visas were issued in a patchwork of sub-types, so on Figure 2 the red “Other work visas and exemptions” category dominates the early years of the chart. However, once the sub-categories were introduced during the reorganisation of work visas in 2008, the main long-term routes - Worker and Temporary Worker - emerge following consolidation. In other words, much of the earlier volume was absorbed in miscellaneous or transitional routes that were later closed.

From 2008 onward, a clear policy shift emerges. In 2010, Prime Minister David Cameron famously pledged to reduce net migration to the “tens of thousands”, ushering in one of the tightest periods of migration control in modern history[23]. The impact of the following administrative restrictions is visible in the data, and tells a story of minor success, but one that ultimately fell short: total work visa issuances fell to around 150,000 by 2012, remaining broadly flat through the rest of the decade.

23 Queen’s Speech - Limits on Non-EU Migration, Cabinet Office, May 2010

www.gov.uk/government/speeches/queens-speech-limits-on-non-eu-migration

The stability of the total masks important internal movement between categories, with Skilled Worker routes gradually increasing in share while Temporary Worker routes declined, but the aggregate picture is one of stasis.

As the story goes, the increasing frustration and inability to bring stubbornly high migration levels any lower coincided with increasing debate over whether Britain’s membership of the European Union and the free movement of labour within it ought to continue[24].

24 EU Speech at Bloomberg, David Cameron, Jan 2013

www.gov.uk/government/speeches/eu-speech-at-bloomberg?

While the nationality of visas is explored further in the next section, it is worth noting that the subdued number of non-EU work visas was partly the result of an economy that could draw freely from European labour markets without issuing formal visas. With the EU’s expansion in 2007 to include Bulgaria and Romania, for example, hundreds of thousands of new workers entered through free movement, further displacing the need for formal visa routes.

The Covid-Era Collapse and the Temporary Contraction of Labour Mobility

The second major turning point occurs in 2020. A combination of Covid-19 and the formal exit of the UK from the EU led to, first, an unprecedented collapse in international mobility, followed by the highest levels of work-based immigration Britain has ever experienced.

Total work visa issuances fell to around 140,000 in 2019, roughly half the pre-pandemic figure. The contraction was driven not by policy design but by global circumstance: lockdowns, travel restrictions, and widespread economic shutdowns effectively froze labour migration for much of 2020 and early 2021.

This period of collapse is important for two reasons:

- First, it marks the lowest level of work-related migration in modern times, providing a statistical baseline against which the subsequent surge becomes even more dramatic. Even so, work visas still remained above former Prime Minister David Cameron’s “tens of thousands” target.

- Second, it coincides with the most significant structural change in Britain’s immigration system for half a century: the end of free movement following the country’s departure from the European Union.

The Brexit referendum in 2016 and the formal exit in 2020 reshaped Britain’s immigration logic. Whereas EU nationals previously required no visa, from January 2021 they became subject to the same points-based immigration system as all other foreign nationals. The Covid-era collapse, then, in hindsight functioned as a pause before a dramatic statistical surge, not only as mobility resumed but also as the face of Britain’s migration system shifted entirely.

Work visa sub-type, 2008 - 2015

	Work visa type	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
1	Charity Worker (previously Tier 5)	0	1,853	2,259	2,194	1,988	2,039	2,079	1,999
2	Creative and Sporting (previously Tier 5)	0	5,951	7,757	8,018	8,770	8,728	8,506	7,093
3	Dependant - Temporary Worker (previously Tier 5)	0	755	1,278	1,316	1,370	1,698	1,826	2,078
4	ECAA Businessperson	2	12	32	62	82	88	155	258
5	Government Authorised Exchange (previously Tier 5)	0	1,732	3,235	3,633	4,576	5,015	5,693	6,242
6	International Agreement (previously Tier 5)	0	445	453	465	423	490	460	463
7	International Graduates Scheme	1,470	13	1	0	0	0	0	0
8	Investor (previously Tier 1)	0	435	583	860	1,390	1,603	2,995	708
9	Minister of Religion (previously Tier 2)	0	372	365	342	303	441	398	411
10	Minister of Religion, Missionary or Member of a Religious Order	763	28	3	2	0	0	0	0
11	Other permit free employment	33,115	3,544	1,665	1,381	1,146	1,320	1,400	1,365
12	Overseas Domestic Worker	16,533	15,132	15,687	16,445	15,744	16,652	16,822	17,366
13	Private Servants in Diplomatic Households	191	1	0	2	1	0	0	0
14	Religious Worker	963	83	14	0	0	0	0	0
15	Religious Worker (previously Tier 5)	0	1,038	1,550	1,645	1,524	2,217	1,914	1,732
16	Tier 1 - Entrepreneur	0	298	428	911	1,655	2,883	3,348	2,928
17	Tier 1 - General	0	24,307	22,940	11,930	5,946	4,390	2,651	1,139
18	Tier 1 - Post Study	0	6,723	8,604	8,978	8,830	2,523	361	14
19	Tier 2 - Dependant	0	15,501	24,604	15,860	10,362	12,529	14,372	15,141
20	Tier 2 - General	0	8,556	9,914	7,764	9,420	11,779	15,254	17,366
21	Tier 2 - Intra-company Transfer	0	22,029	29,170	10,788	2,415	2,398	2,169	2,182
22	UK Ancestry	7,711	4,888	4,770	4,354	3,838	4,160	4,372	4,826
23	Work Permit	76,930	16,505	3,905	1,588	636	230	82	72
24	Working Holidaymakers	34,462	5,094	549	17	5	1	0	0
25	Youth Mobility Scheme (previously Tier 5)	0	20,083	20,720	20,652	19,624	20,857	23,525	25,321

Table: Migration Watch • Source: Gov UK • Created with Datawrapper

Table 2: Sub-types of work visas following consolidation and the introduction of the Points Based System, 2008 - 2015

The Post-Covid Surge: The Points-Based System and Record Migration

The most striking feature of Figure 2 is the post-Covid explosion in work visa numbers. From 2021 onwards, total issuances skyrocketed from around 120,000 to over 600,000 by 2023: a five-fold increase in just two years. This surge dwarfs all previous peaks and represents the defining feature of Britain's post-Brexit immigration settlement.

On the face of it, Figure 2 would suggest that this is almost entirely to the "Worker" category (shown in green). Temporary and other routes also rise modestly, but the main driver is the opening of the **Skilled Worker** route under the new PBS, and the rapid expansion of the remit that this visa covered. The stand-out visa that contributes the most to the rapid rise in numbers is the **Health and Care Worker** visa, introduced in 2021 - and accounting for over 50% of all work visas issued since then (56.6%).

The introduction of this system was billed as a way to attract "the brightest and the best", yet in practice it has operated as a liberalising framework. Even in recent months, former Prime Minister Boris Johnson asserted that the post-Brexit system "restored control"[24].

Employers across a broad range of sectors were suddenly able to recruit from anywhere in the world, and the salary thresholds were reduced for many shortage occupations, and employers were granted broader sponsorship powers. As Neil O'Brien MP observed, the post-Brexit system may have originally been "presented as one of control" but had in fact become "a major expansion of work migration" rather than reduction[25]. As a result, the number of sponsored worker visas ballooned, particularly in health and social care, hospitality, and technology.

The magnitude of this surge is best appreciated in Figure 4, which overlays the same data with bands indicating Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) eligibility. This chart illustrates that the cohorts entering since 2020 will sequentially become eligible for permanent settlement from 2025 onwards, and eventually citizenship.

Work visa sub-type, 2016 - 2025

	Work visa type ▲	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	20
1	Charity Worker (previously Tier 5)	1,770	1,583	1,518	1,533	569	1,171	1,397	1,611	1,717	6
2	Creative and Sporting (previously Tier 5)	7,005	6,964	7,580	7,960	3,134	4,135	12	0	0	
3	ECAA Businessperson	518	738	799	2,943	4,208	3,796	147	125	66	
4	Government Authorised Exchange (previously Tier 5)	6,391	6,377	6,821	6,889	2,202	5,822	8,926	7,699	7,122	3,9
5	Health and Care Worker	0	0	0	0	1,194	63,291	157,636	348,157	110,473	29,2
6	International Agreement (previously Tier 5)	413	415	467	546	237	436	461	473	361	1
7	Investor (previously Tier 1)	590	881	957	918	570	784	363	132	64	
8	Minister of Religion (previously Tier 2)	340	345	380	421	334	448	526	602	610	2
9	Other permit free employment	1,389	1,323	1,638	1,912	1,536	1,877	1,586	1,062	981	3
10	Overseas Domestic Worker	18,569	19,886	20,299	21,075	6,244	8,999	18,515	19,986	20,972	12,8
11	Religious Worker (previously Tier 5)	1,813	1,601	1,632	1,386	621	1,387	1,252	1,415	1,296	7
12	Tier 1 - Entrepreneur	2,509	2,505	3,095	3,294	559	349	251	133	30	
13	Tier 2 - General	18,364	19,973	24,373	36,095	27,252	464	17	11	2	
14	Tier 2 - Intra-company Transfer	2,000	308	304	302	101	4	1	0	0	
15	UK Ancestry	4,123	3,694	3,853	3,673	2,981	4,019	5,085	4,311	2,516	9
16	Work Permit	92	192	275	12	24	30	62	135	44	
17	Youth Mobility Scheme (previously Tier 5)	22,327	21,557	20,815	20,107	7,965	8,313	16,886	22,680	24,400	12,5

Table: Migration Watch • Source: Gov.UK • Created with Datawrapper

Table 3: Sub-types of work visas in the years following the Brexit referendum.

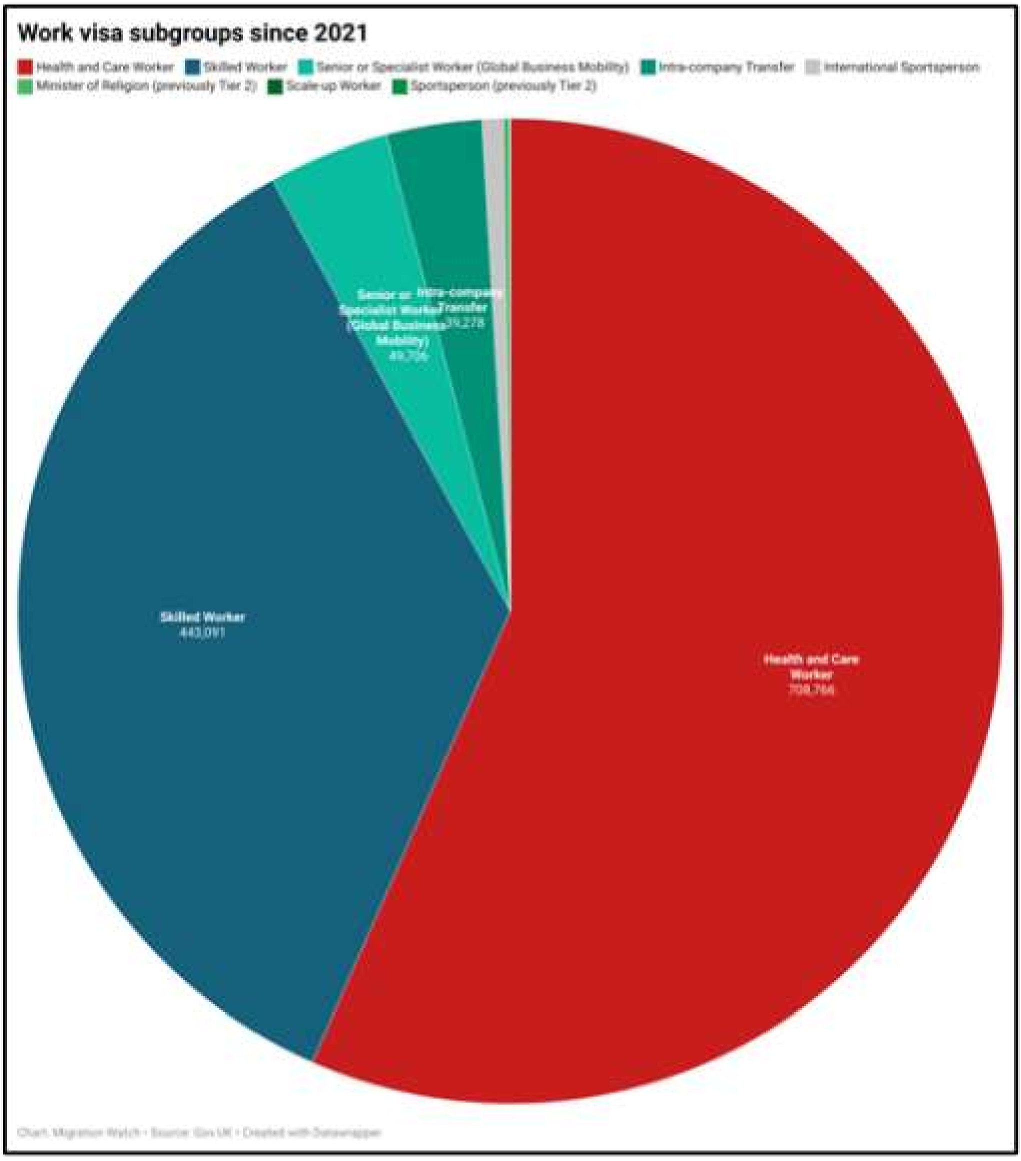


Figure 3: Work visa subgroups issued since 2021

In practical terms, this means that unless rules change, the 2021–2023 spike in work visas will generate a wave of settlement applications in the latter half of the decade. Moreover, the MAC's "Who Stays, Who Leaves?" report[25] pointed out that there is a significantly high level of retention in specific fields:

Occupations associated with the human health and social work industry — particularly nursing and social care — demonstrate the highest stay rates among all common Skilled Worker occupations. Stay rates for nurses remain consistently high across their time in the UK, for example, 94% of nurses still have valid immigration status five years after arrival.

25 *Who Stays, Who Leaves? Migration Advisory Committee, May 2026*

gov.uk/government/publications/who-stays-who-leaves-evidence-from-the-skilled-worker-route

94% of the 22,894 Health and Social Care visas that went to "Nursing Professionals" (Occupational Minor Group 223) issued in 2023 alone would lead to an increase of over 21,000 alone; if a similar level were to be maintained with the 108,099 "Caring personal services" (Occupational Minor Group 613) issued in the same year would lead to an increase of over 101,000. In total, if 94% of the 180,642 Health and Social Care visas issued from the beginning of 2023 to mid-2025 stayed, nearly 170,000 people could join the population.

Similarly, the effect is cumulative: each annual cohort adds to the pool of potential permanent residents, converting what were initially presented as temporary labour routes into long-term migration flows.

The rise also reflects demographic and economic pressures. Universities UK argued "the government should build on the recent positive immigration policy changes to ensure the UK increases its [university] market share"[26]. The Migration Advisory Committee has since observed that international student fee income has become increasingly important to the higher education funding model, with wider implications for regional economies[27].

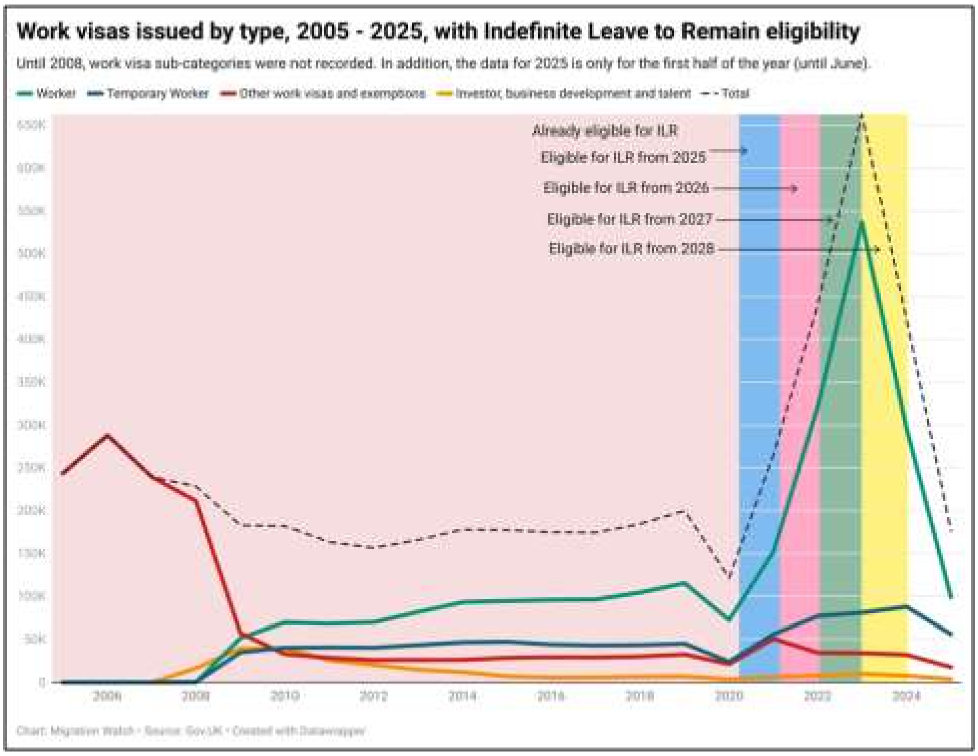


Figure 4: Indefinite Leave to Remain eligibility by year for work visas

26 *Written Evidence Submitted by Universities UK, August 2020*

committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/10255/pdf/

27 *Graduate Route: Rapid Review, Migration Advisory Committee, May 2024*

gov.uk/government/publications/graduate-route-rapid-review/graduate-route-rapid-review-accessible

Another contributing factor is administrative inertia. Having dismantled free movement, the UK's immigration apparatus was recalibrated to process large numbers of skilled and temporary visas rapidly, with minimal scrutiny. The result has been a structurally high level of visa issuance that persists even as the immediate post-pandemic pressures ease.

By 2024, the total number of work visas begins to fall again - to around 400,000 - but this still represents more than double the pre-Brexit norm. The 2025 figure, covering only the first half of the year, suggests that the total will remain historically elevated. The evidence therefore suggests not a temporary surge but the emergence of a structurally higher baseline for migration.

Structural Implications

The data across all three graphs collectively demonstrate that Britain's work visa regime has become a permanent driver of population growth rather than a flexible economic tool. Before 2008, work migration operated within a relatively narrow (though remarkably high) band of 200,000–300,000 per year. After a decade of political promises and administrative restraint, the post-Brexit settlement effectively removed those limits. The Covid pandemic provided a temporary interruption but no structural correction; instead, it accelerated demand for foreign labour once restrictions were lifted. As we have continually pointed out, an increased demand for foreign labour leads to an increased reliance on it, which in turn suppresses wages and reduces Britain's own long-term skills investment[28].

Figure 4, with its ILR eligibility shading, highlights the long-term consequences of these short-term surges. The vast majority of post-2020 arrivals will be entitled to apply for permanent settlement within five years. This means that the next few years - from 2025 to 2028 - will likely see the largest influx of ILR applications (and potential grants) in British history, entrenching a new baseline for population growth.

28 *45,000 Work Permit Cap Needed in Midst of Rocketing Redundancies, Migration Watch, Oct 2020*

migrationwatchuk.org/45000-work-permit-cap-needed-in-midst-of-rocketing-redundancies/

Summary

The three graphs tell a story of how Britain moved from control to expansion in the space of two decades. The post-2008 decline reflects a political determination to reduce immigration. The Covid collapse was an unavoidable external shock. But the post-Covid explosion represents a deliberate policy choice - a structural liberalisation masked by the language of control. The points-based system, far from curbing migration, has institutionalised it on a scale that no previous government would have contemplated.

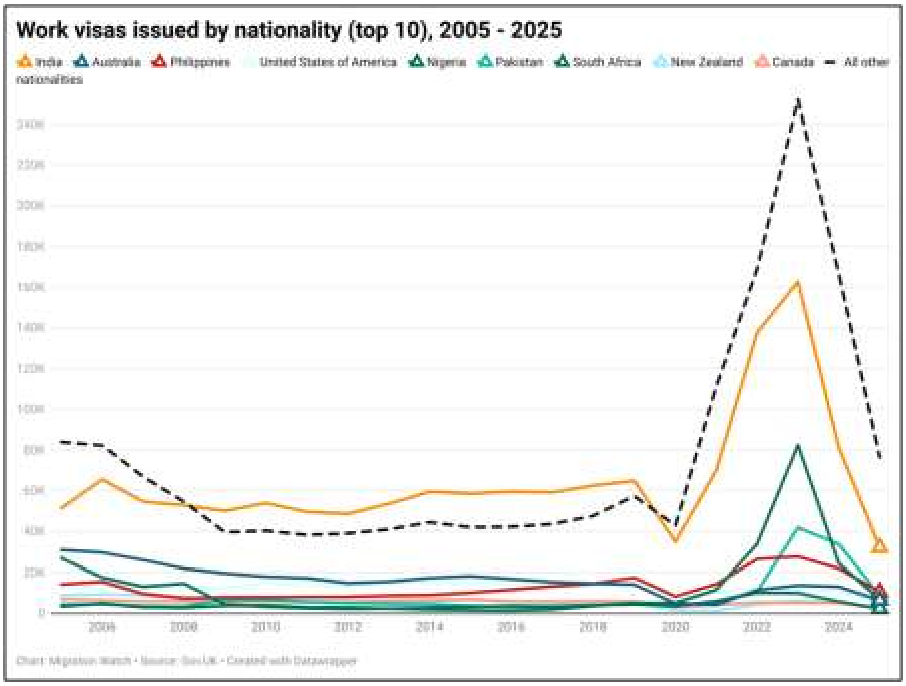
Unless major reform is undertaken, the current trajectory means that the record levels of 2021–2023 are not an aberration but the foundation of a new normal - one in which the work visa route, like the student visa system, becomes a primary engine of long-term settlement in the United Kingdom.

Section 3
Nationalities and Dependants

This section analyses the composition of Britain's work visas into two categories: composition, and origin. Origin is addressed first, and the geography of international labour migration is traced from primarily Anglosphere nations with a significant South Asian presence, to a primarily Sub-Saharan African and South Asian, and how that reorientation has impacted on Britain's migration policy and labour landscape. Thereafter, composition is examined, especially in terms of the dependancy crisis: not merely that more people are arriving, but that the system now delivers families where it once delivered (mostly) workers.

The Shifting National Sources of Britain's Work Visas

The first part of this section looks at how the sources of Britain's work visas have shifted over the last two decades, and how a combination of national decisions and global events have influenced these trajectories. The second part examines the impact this has had on Britain's labour market and the overreliance that has emerged as a result of a dependency on international labour flows.



How the Origin Nations of Foreign Workers Have Changed

As outlined in Section One of this paper, in the mid-2000s, the UK's work-migration framework was defined by temporary routes, youth mobility, and intra-company transfers. Work migrants from Anglosphere nations (Australians, New Zealanders, Canadians, and Americans) made up a large share of visa recipients in the early-2000s, reflecting historic Commonwealth ties. Alongside this Anglosphere prevalence however was a dominance of work visas by Indian nationals, which were primarily long-term, skilled work visas. Collectively, since 2005, this has meant that nearly one-and-a-half million work visas (of all types) have been issued to Indian nationals.

The global financial crisis of 2008 marked the first major turning point in the timeline of Britain's work visas system; as detailed above, the government replaced this loose framework with a codified, tiered Points-Based System (PBS). Introduced between 2008 and 2010, the PBS linked eligibility to skill level, salary, and sponsorship, consolidating dozens of previous categories into a unified structure. The result was a moderate contraction of short-term and casual work migration, while there was a noticeable, permanent and significant shift to an emphasis on skilled work visas - and, by consequence, long-term migration.

Through the 2010s, visa numbers stabilised, though at a level broadly considered to be too high. The total volume of work-related entries remained broadly constant, but it was at this stage that the origins of migrants began to shift decisively. Indian nationals, already dominant, became an increasingly large proportion of skilled-worker applicants, reflecting the expansion of India's professional sectors in IT, medicine, and engineering.

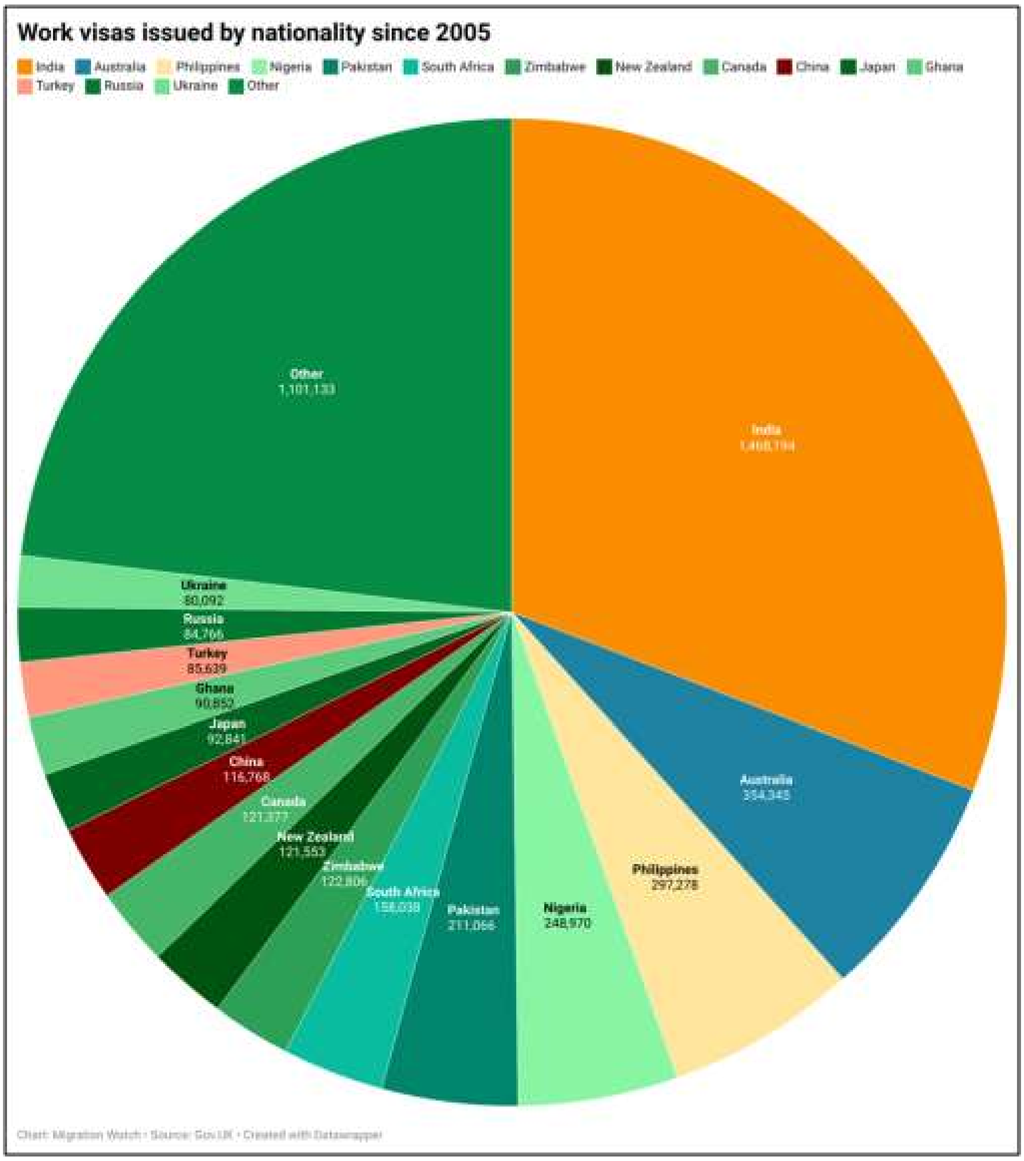
The inflow from Anglosphere nations plateaued, in part because the economies of these nations were booming and in turn had a greater demand for labour than previously, and while EU free movement continued to provide low-wage labour, the formal visa system was already being re-weighted toward South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. By 2019, the geography of British migration was changing even before Brexit: Western participation was shrinking, and developing economies were taking its place[29].

29 *See appendix for all graphs for the nine highest work visa origin nations.*

30 *The UK's Points-Based Immigration System: Policy Statement, Home Office, Feb 2020*

gov.uk/government/publications/the-uks-points-based-immigration-system-policy-statement/the-uks-points-based-immigration-system-policy-statement

The end of EU free movement on 1 January 2021 completed that transformation. The new points-based immigration system[30] opened eligibility to all nationalities, allowing employers to recruit globally rather than continentally. This liberalisation coincided with post-Covid labour shortages, generating an unprecedented surge in work-visa issuances between 2021 and 2023. Indian nationals were the largest beneficiaries, followed by Nigeria, Pakistan, and the Philippines. According to the Home Office, India alone accounted for more than 160,000 skilled-worker visas in 2023. For the first time, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa together represented the majority of new inflows into the British workforce.



By 2024, this expansion triggered its own backlash. Record-high migration numbers and a steep rise in dependants led to tighter controls: salary thresholds were raised, switching rules limited, and restrictions placed on family accompaniment. Within twelve months, total work-visa grants fell by nearly 40%[31]. Yet the underlying composition of migration remained unchanged. Non-EU nationals still accounted for roughly 90% of work visas, and India retained its position as the principal source. The UK had entered a new era - global in scope, dependent on developing economies, and shaped as much by external supply as by domestic policy.

__31__ Reducing Net Migration Factsheet, Home Office, May 2024

homeofficemedia.blog.gov.uk/2024/05/23/reducing-net-migration-factsheet-december-2023/

The Structural Shifts and Their Consequences

Across the full twenty-year span, India's rise is the defining structural fact. Since 2005, more than 1.4 million work visas have been issued to Indian nationals — over a million through the skilled-worker route alone — exceeding the combined total for Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Nigeria, and Pakistan. India's vast, English-speaking graduate base aligns with the UK's labour-market demands in healthcare, technology, and professional services. The Migration Observatory confirms that "*Indian citizens remain by far the largest recipients of UK work visas*"[32].

__32__ Work Visas and Migrant Workers in the UK, The Migration Observatory, August 2025

migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/work-visas-and-migrant-workers-in-the-uk

Alongside this dependency sits a bifurcated migration landscape. One stream - small, reciprocal, and largely symbolic - persists through the youth-mobility and temporary-work routes dominated by Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. The other - large, employer-driven, and economically important - is made up of long-term worker visas dominated by India, Nigeria, Pakistan, and the Philippines. Australians and New Zealanders account for the majority of temporary visas (roughly 172,000 and 62,000 since 2005), while Indians alone account for more than one million skilled-worker grants.

The collapse of temporary routes since 2008 also means that Britain's migration is no longer temporary in practice. Workers arriving under the current system tend to hold multi-year contracts, with opportunities to switch visa categories or apply for settlement. While the visas may be titled as temporary, in reality they often lead to extensions or switches, meaning the UK has become accustomed to relying on migration as a source of labour. This has had significant knock-on effects for the domestic workforce as well as key sectors, which are now overly dependent on migratory labour.

The result is a labour market that is more international and more vulnerable. Britain's reliance on a narrow group of source countries exposes it to external shocks — from political unrest to currency crises. When the Naira collapsed in 2023[33], British universities and health institutions employing Nigerian staff faced immediate financial strain[34]. At the same time, the 2021–23 boom and 2024–25 decline in work visas demonstrate how sensitive the visa system has become to incremental policy shifts.

These dynamics have transformed Britain's institutions. The health and care sectors in particular are defined by the geography of the visa system: Indian, Nigerian, and Filipino workers dominate, while EU nationals, once central to the workforce, have dwindled. This dependence secures short-term capacity but weakens long-term resilience. Domestic training pipelines atrophy, wage growth is constrained by international competition, and local labour participation remains stagnant. Migration policy has thus become a substitute for labour-market reform.

By 2025, Britain's migration regime had reached a paradoxical equilibrium: highly regulated yet globally expansive; formally selective yet structurally dependent. The tightening after 2024 reduced numbers but not reliance.

The twenty-year evolution from open exchange to global dependency marks a permanent reordering. Temporary routes survive as diplomatic artefacts, while the economic engine of Britain's labour market now runs on the energy of the Global South.

33 *Article IV Consultation Press Release, IMF, May 2024*

www.imf.org/en/-/media/files/publications/cr/2024/english/1ngaea2024002.pdf

34 *Higher Education and Funding: Threat of Insolvency and International Students, Education Committee, May 2026*

publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5901/cmselect/cmeduc/807/report.html

The Dependency Crisis

The composition of those coming to Britain on work visas has shifted to increasingly feature dependants (family members, primarily). While dependants have always featured as part of Britain's work visa migration patterns, the proportion of dependants has risen and, in the case of some visa subroutes - especially skilled worker visas (Figure 9) and investors (Figure 5) - even become the majority of that subroute.

Furthermore, the MAC report[35] confirms that health and social work migrants are by far the most likely to remain long term (88.2% after five years vs. 76.4% across other industries), and that women — who dominate health and care work — are approximately five percentage points more likely to stay than men.

***35** Who Stays, Who Leaves? Migration Advisory Committee, May 2026*

gov.uk/government/publications/who-stays-who-leaves-evidence-from-the-skilled-worker-route

The critical development is not the headline volume but the compositional shift: dependants now outrun main applicants, turning a labour pipeline into a family-settlement route.

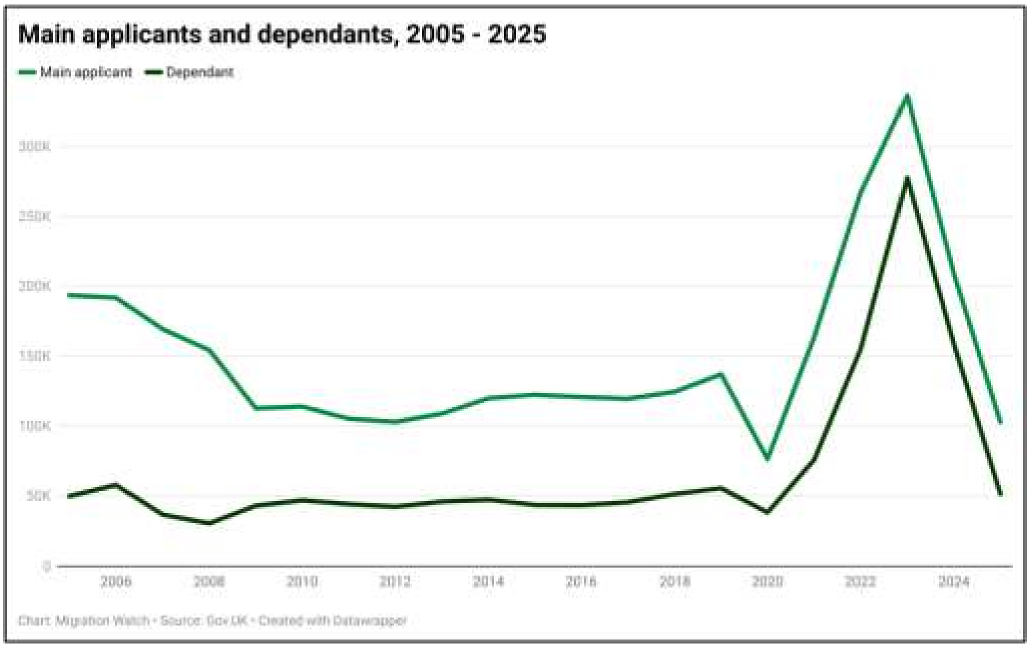


Figure 5: Main applicants and dependants, 2005-2025

The investor-visa graph (Figure 6) tells a story of boom, bust, and near extinction. Between 2008 and 2010 main applicants jumped from 8,000 to 18,000 with dependants close behind at 17,000, reflecting the post-financial-crisis inflow of global capital. By 2012, however, applications had fallen by more than half to 8,000 and continued downward to barely 2,000 by 2015.

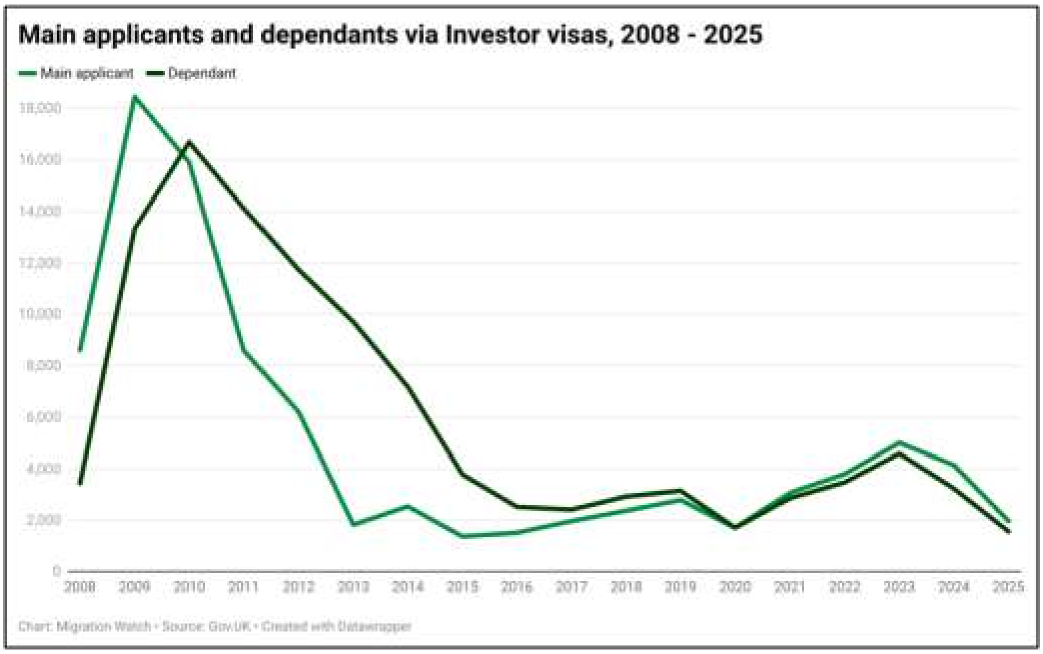


Figure 6: Main applicants and dependants via Investor visas, 2008-2025

The numbers never recovered; by 2025 both main and dependant lines sit around 1–2 thousand. The collapse—over 90 percent from the 2010 peak—illustrates the effect of reputational concerns (money-laundering scandals) and successive tightening of due-diligence requirements, culminating in the scheme's suspension in 2022.

While investor migration shrank, worker and temporary-worker routes expanded to fill the gap - and then exceed it. The "other work-based visas" chart (Figure 3) shows an early high of roughly 145,000 main applicants in 2008, plunging to 20,000 by 2011 and stabilising thereafter between 20,000 and 25,000. Dependants effectively disappeared to under 2,000 per year, so this category has become marginal. Its early volatility reflects the abolition of the old Tier 1 General route and the consolidation of work categories under Tier 2 and Tier 5 schemes.

By contrast, temporary-worker visas (Figure 4) reveal steady resilience. Main applicants grew after 2008 to around 30,000 by 2010 and climbed gradually to 43,000 by 2015. After a brief pandemic dip in 2020 (near 20,000), numbers doubled in just two years, peaking above 70,000 in 2023. The dependants line, however, remains minimal, indicating that the temporary work visa schemes (such as seasonal agriculture and creative-arts placements) continue to function as genuinely temporary labour flows rather than family-migration routes. Their proportional stability makes them the least inflationary element in overall visa growth.

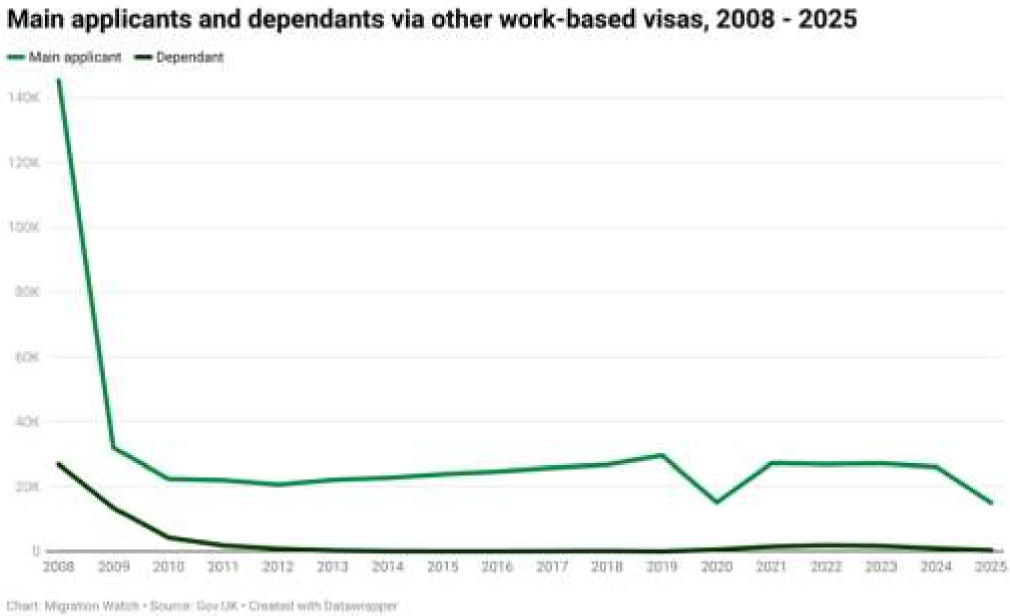


Figure 7: Main applicants and dependants via other work-based visas, 2008-2025

The worker-visa chart (Figure 5) captures the true engine of recent migration. Main applicants rose from under 10,000 in 2008 to roughly 55,000 by 2015 and stayed around that level until 2019. Thereafter, like the total-visa line, they exploded to 225,000 by 2023 - a four-fold increase in four years.

Most egregiously, dependants surged even faster, overtaking mains at about 260,000 that year. This near-parity is critical: dependants accounted for over 53 percent of all individuals entering on worker-related routes in 2023. Since that year, dependants have exceeded main applicants continuously. Such a state of affairs is entirely unsustainable, and reflects a re-coded work visa immigration system that does not function as a labour pipeline, but as a route to family settlement.

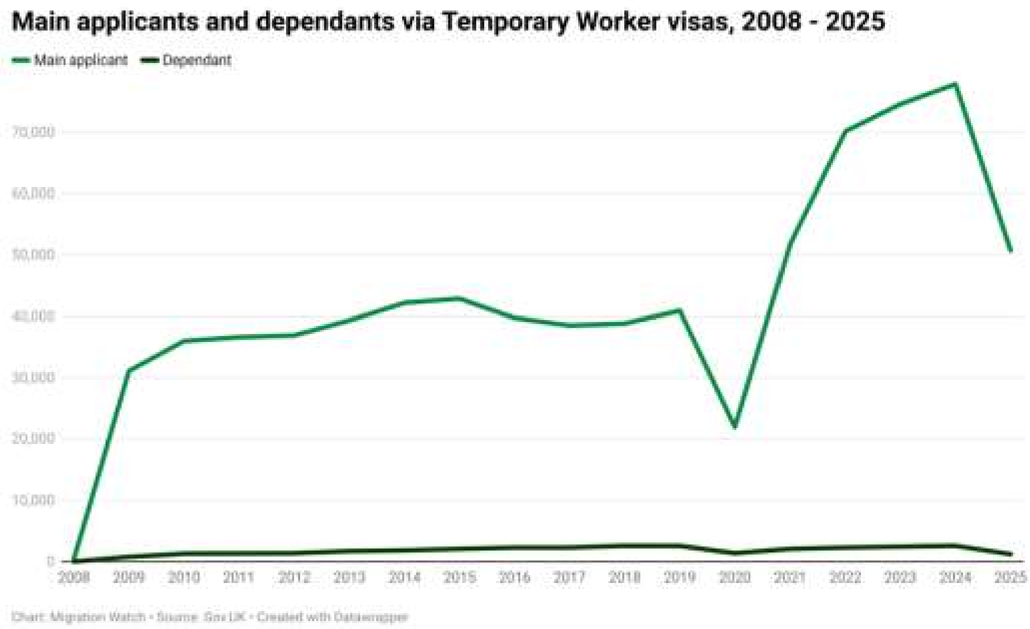


Figure 8: Main applicants and dependants via Temporary Worker visas, 2008-2025

Numerically, the post-2021 growth represents an additional 350,000 people per year compared with the pre-pandemic average, equivalent to a medium-sized city.

In addition, the proportional shift shows that for every ten workers arriving, roughly eleven family members accompanied them. That inversion underscores the extent to which work migration has become a family-migration mechanism in all but name.

Dependants' Expansion Reshapes Migration Composition and Policy Implications

Taken together, the five graphs show a clear transformation in dependency ratios. Between 2008 and 2018 dependants rarely exceeded one-third of total inflows in any route - still a high ratio, but somewhat manageable due to the overall numerically stable levels of migration.

By 2022–23 they constituted roughly half of all entrants across both worker and student-linked visas (Migration Watch, 2025). The investor route once produced one dependant per main applicant (a one-to-one ratio), but by 2015 it had dwindled to about 0.5. Meanwhile, in the worker route the ratio rose from 0.6 in 2015 to 1.1 in 2023. This inversion of proportionality - dependants outnumbering main applicants - is historically unprecedented in British migration data.

There are three broad explanations for this pattern:

- **Policy design.** When the post-Brexit points-based system replaced the EU's free movement framework in 2021, it widened eligibility for dependants across most skilled-worker categories, including health and care occupations where labour shortages were acute. Employers could sponsor a nurse and her family with relative ease. Consequently, a single recruitment decision often yielded multiple arrivals.
- **Economic substitution.** As wages stagnated in low-skill sectors, employers increasingly relied on temporary-worker routes (notably agriculture) that permitted few dependants. But at the same time, family-friendly categories like health and education were expanded, pushing the overall dependant ratio upward.
- **Administrative lag and graduate retention.** Many dependants entered via follow-on applications from graduates transitioning to work visas. This "piggy-back" effect inflated 2022–23 totals even before new work offers were issued.

The sudden drop in 2024–25 therefore reflects both deliberate tightening and the exhaustion of that backlog. Yet the structural imprint remains: dependants have become an embedded component of Britain's migration inflows, meaning that any numerical target for net migration must account for family size, not merely visa count.

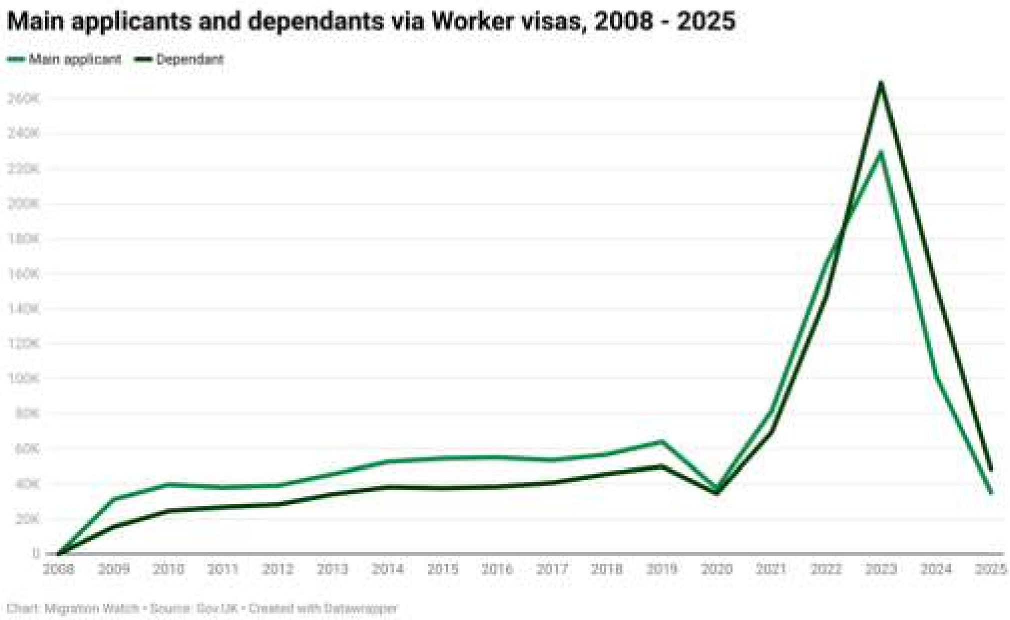


Figure 9: Main applicants and dependants via Worker visas, 2008-2025

To appreciate the scale, it helps to approximate magnitudes at three benchmark years:

Year	All-visa mains	All-visa dependants	Total	Dependants %
2010	≈ 120 k	≈ 40 k	160 k	25 %
2020	≈ 90 k	≈ 30 k	120 k	25 %
2023	≈ 350 k	≈ 270 k	620 k	44 %

Even allowing for rounding, the total number of people entering on long-term work-related visas roughly quadrupled in thirteen years. The bulk of that rise occurred in just three years (2021–23), a rate of expansion rarely seen outside wartime mobilisation or EU -accession periods.

Year	Worker-visa mains	Dependants	Dependants per main
2015	55 k	35 k	0.64
2019	60 k	45 k	0.75
2023	225 k	260 k	1.16

Within the work-visa subset alone: This ratio demonstrates a qualitative change: by 2023 most new work-related migrants were family members rather than workers themselves. The temporary-worker route, conversely, maintained a stable ratio below 0.1 throughout, confirming that genuine short-term labour programmes can coexist with family-migration containment.

Broader Interpretation

This section charts a transition from a labour-oriented to a settlement-oriented migration model. Before 2010, Britain's work-visa system primarily imported individuals whose stay was functionally temporary. By the early-2020s, it had evolved into a family-migration architecture, with economic rationale serving as the entry ticket rather than the sole purpose of residence.

Numerically, main-applicant volumes in 2023 were roughly equal to the combined totals of all work and investor routes in 2010, yet dependants multiplied more than five-fold. Proportionally, the share of dependants among all work-visa entrants rose from 23 percent in 2008 to 51 percent in 2023, then fell back to 33 percent by 2025. Even such a fall, while significant statistically, remains high by historic standards.

The investor-visa's demise meanwhile underscores a re-orientation from capital inflow to labour inflow. A system once designed to attract wealth has become one designed to supply workforce gaps. Yet because family accompaniment has been so generous, the demographic effect is much larger than the labour contribution alone.

Summary

From 2005 to 2025, three numerical and proportional trends define Britain's work-visa landscape:

- A long-term contraction followed by an extraordinary post-2020 surge in total main applicants and dependants, peaking around 2023 and only partially receding since.
- A collapse in investor migration offset by explosive growth in worker-based routes, turning the visa system's emphasis from wealth attraction to labour recruitment.
- A structural rise in dependency ratios, with dependants shifting from a marginal share to near-parity with main applicants, fundamentally altering the composition and fiscal implications of legal migration.

These trends confirm that the pressures driving overall immigration are now internal to the legal visa framework itself rather than external anomalies. Managing numbers in the coming decade will therefore depend less on stopping illegal entry and more on recalibrating who counts as a principal migrant, who may accompany them, and how temporary any "temporary" visa truly is.

This also means that systems like ILR need to be restructured, especially in how long a visa holder ought to have been in the country for before they are granted ILR, as there is a significant chance that, as of 2026, the post-2021 'Boriswave' of migration will lead to a major and permanent increase to the population. Also, certain work visa streams that are currently classified as skilled may need to be recalibrated as temporary, whilst the period that a skilled work visa allows a migrant to remain in the country for should be reconsidered and extended to prevent work visas intended to resolve labour shortages becoming a pipeline for permanent settlement.

Section 4
The "Boriswave"

In the years following Brexit and the Covid pandemic, Britain's immigration landscape has been totally transformed. The shift is not only quantitative but qualitative: the pattern of migration to the United Kingdom has changed from a European, predominantly low-wage inflow under free movement, to a global, semi-formalised system dominated by entry via skilled and temporary routes, inflated through specific visa sub-types (especially the Health and Care Worker visa). Between 2021 and 2025, the number of work visas issued each year has multiplied several times over. Far from reducing dependency on foreign labour, the government's points-based system has firmly entrenched it, replacing one form of mass migration with another.

This period - from 2021 until now - has been termed the "Boriswave", after Prime Minister Boris Johnson under whom the new system was introduced and formalised. Though Johnson has since attempted to distance himself from his legacy, stating that his reforms restored control[36]:

"We now have a system that enables us to have zero that was not legally possible before. Whatever you say about the government I lead, I make two points: we restored full democratic legal control over our laws and our borders. And if the people choose, we can have zero immigration into the UK."

Johnson's claim rests on a technicality; Britain is now de jure sovereign over its own borders, but that sovereignty has been neglected or wilfully surrendered. The Boriswave is, evidently, the period of the highest, loosest, and lowest-skilled era of migration in Britain's history.

The data now shows that two sectors alone — health and social care, and agriculture — account for the overwhelming majority of all visas issued under the skilled and temporary categories. Meanwhile, the national profile of those entering has narrowed drastically: India, Nigeria, Pakistan, and the Philippines

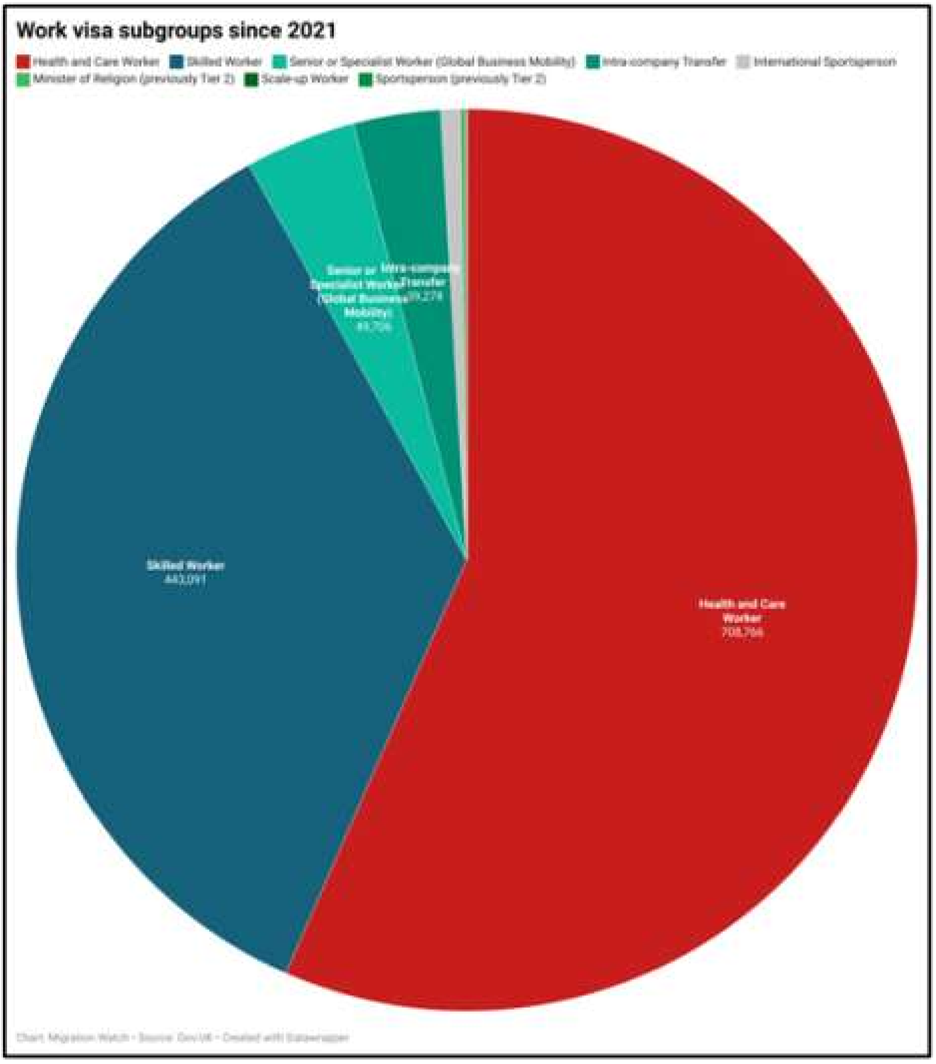
36 *Daily T Podcast, Boris Johnson, October 2025*

www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2025/10/13/johnson-dont-blame-me-boriswave/

The Expansion of Skilled Worker Visas

The rise in skilled worker visas since 2021 has been extraordinary. From a low base in the first year of the new points-based regime, numbers have more than quadrupled by 2025. The sharpest increases have come in the Human Health and Social Work Activities category, which now dominates the entire skilled route.

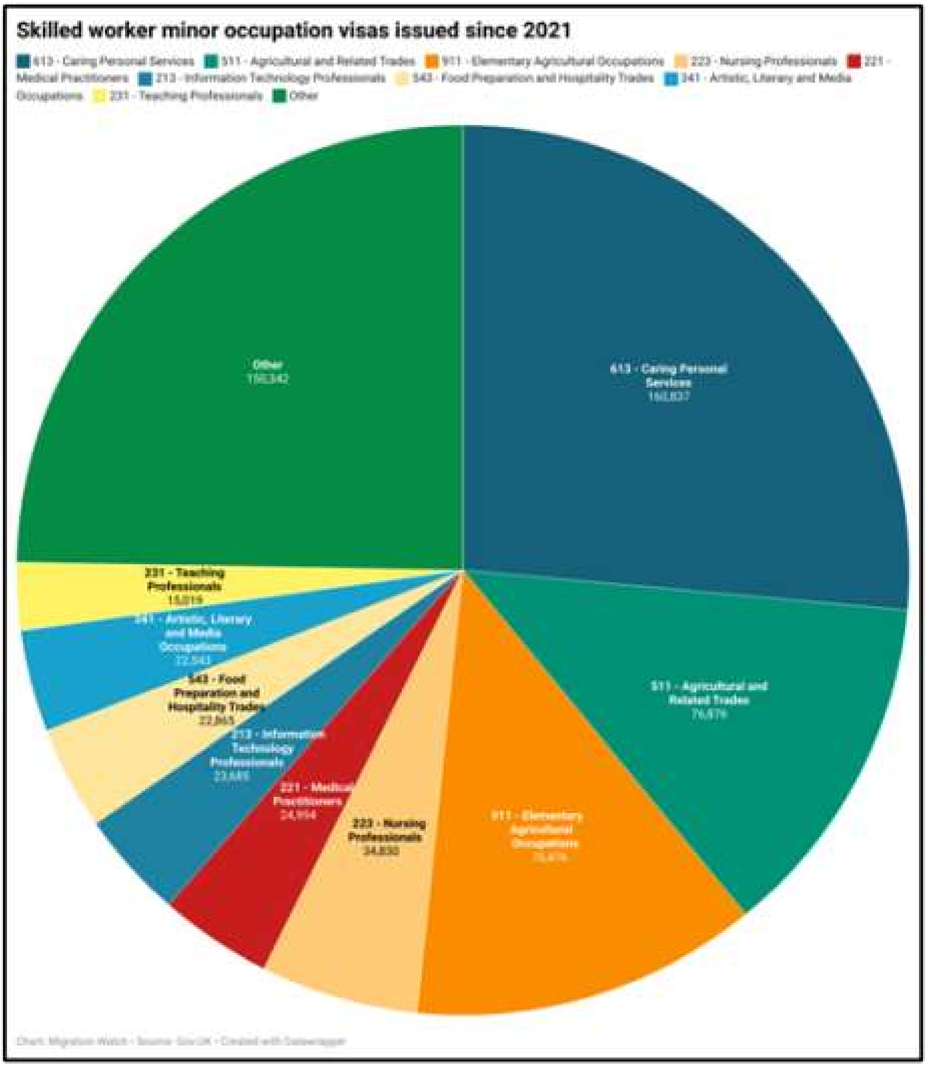
In July 2020, at the height of the Covid pandemic, the government widened sponsorship eligibility for hospitals and private care homes, enabling mass recruitment from abroad, and created a bespoke route, the Health and Care Worker visa, specifically for the ambiguously-defined "healthcare professionals"[37].



37 *Government Launches Health and Social Care Visa to Ensure UK Health and Care Services Have Access to the Best Global Talent, Home Office, July 2020*

www.gov.uk/government/news/government-launches-health-and-care-visa-to-ensure-uk-health-and-care-services-have-access-to-the-best-global-talent

What began as an ostensibly emergency measure has become a structural dependency: even as the urgency of the labour shortage unveiled by the pandemic faded, the inflow of foreign health workers continued to rise, buoyed by an expansion of the service to include care workers, care assistants and home care workers[38]. By 2025, health and social care account for the clear majority of all skilled visas issued, eclipsing every other industry combined.



The truth is that this shortage of qualified staff reflected issues in the British labour market and public sector as a consequence of long-term under-investment and short-termism at the heart of labour strategies; for example, Britain has for a long period of time capped the amount of places for medical students

38 *Adult Social Care and Immigration, Migration Advisory Committee, April 2022*

www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-adult-social-care-2022/adult-social-care-and-immigration-accessible

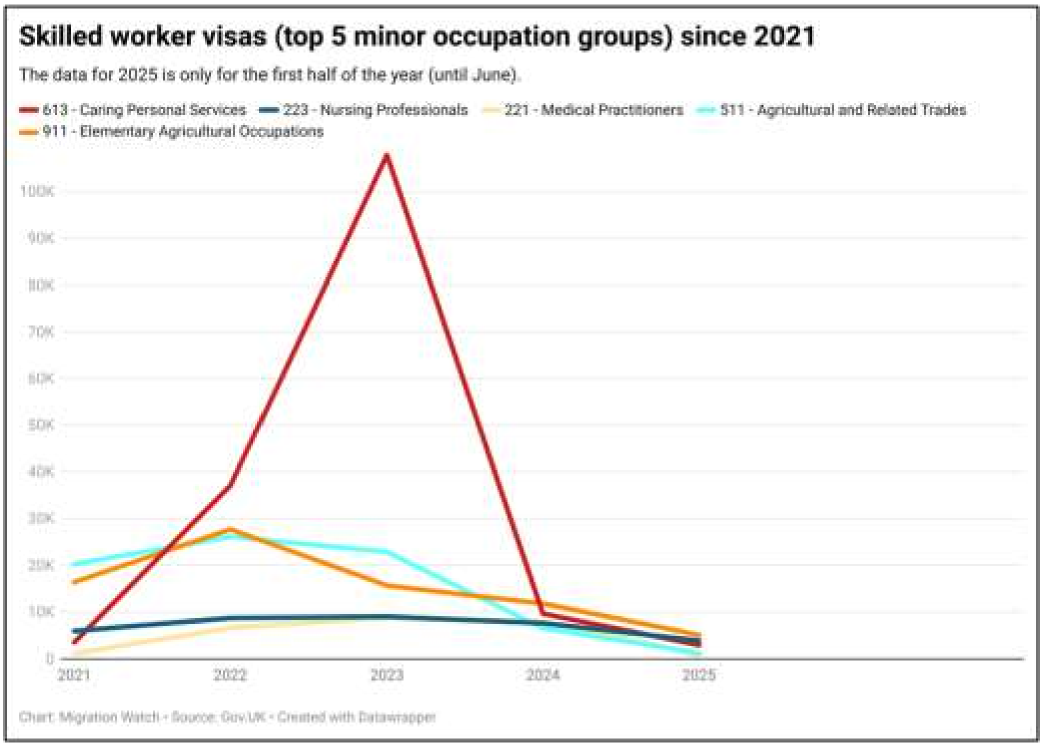
39 *Question for Department of Health and Social Care, House of Lords, Feb 2026*

questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2026-02-05/hl14320

at British universities (8,126 in 2025[39]), whilst relying on hiring medical staff from overseas, including 3,135 General Practitioners in 2025. As a result, immigration has been used to paper over the cracks, allowing for chronic under-investment and wage suppression.

Other sectors show smaller but steady growth. Education and Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities have both increased since 2021, reflecting the continued shortage of qualified teachers, researchers, and engineers. The Information and Communications sector also shows a consistent upward trend, driven by the UK's need for IT specialists and digital infrastructure staff in a post-pandemic economy.

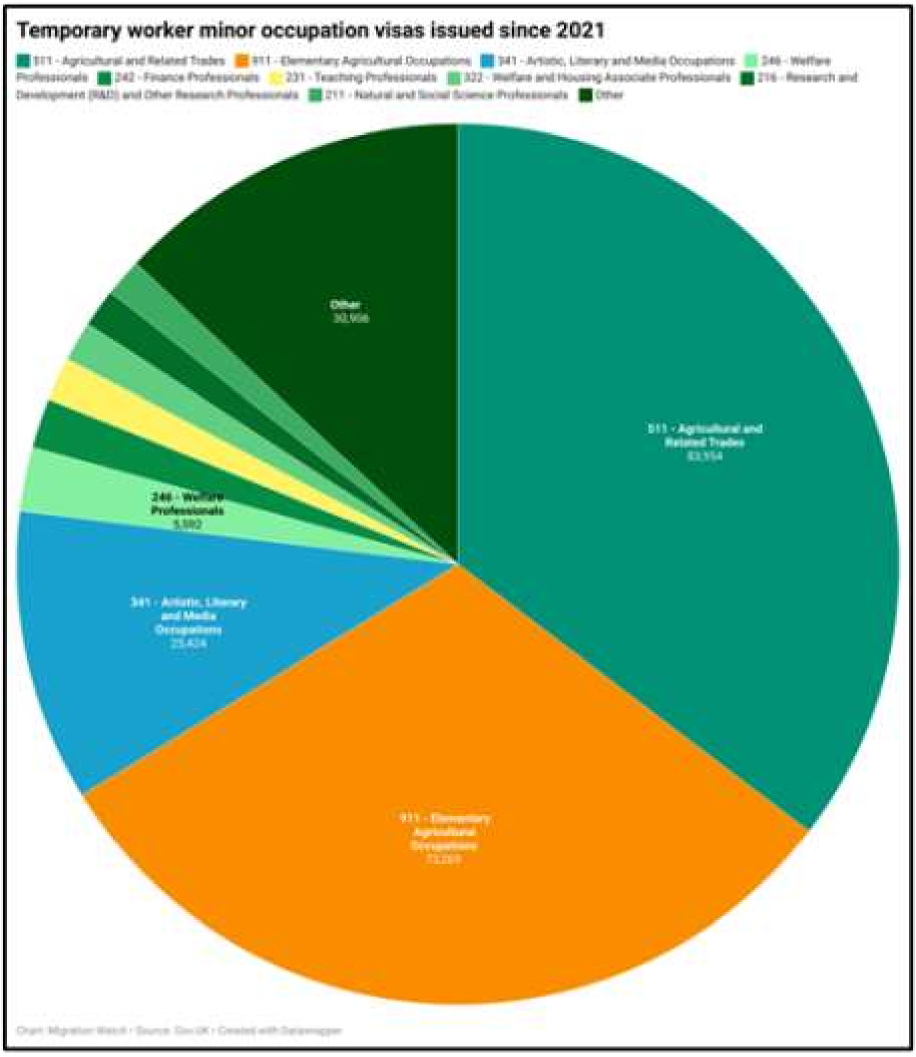
By contrast, the traditional productive sectors, specifically manufacturing and construction , remain relatively stagnant. Despite political promises of "re-industrialisation," the data reveals little appetite or capacity to attract skilled tradespeople through the visa system. The modern UK immigration structure therefore mirrors the modern British economy: heavily tilted toward services, reliant on public-sector recruitment, and increasingly dependent on non-European labour.



The Return of Temporary Worker Visas

Temporary worker visas have followed a similar trajectory, albeit concentrated in different industries. From roughly 40,000 issued in early 2021, the total exceeded 200,000 by 2025. Here too, one category dwarfs all others: Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing.

The surge in agricultural visas followed the consequences of Brexit. With the end of free movement, the seasonal farm workforce that traditionally arrived from Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria collapsed almost overnight. To plug the gap, the government expanded the Seasonal Worker Scheme — effectively re-importing the old labour model but under a new name. The number of visas issued under this route more than doubled between 2021 and 2023, before stabilising, but at very high levels, in 2024 and 2025.



This sectoral dependency has now become embedded. Far from incentivising mechanisation or domestic recruitment, the new system has institutionalised reliance on short-term foreign labour. The geographical reach of this workforce has shifted sharply east and south: the majority of farm workers now come from Central and South Asia — Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, India, and Pakistan — rather than Europe.

A secondary source of growth comes from Administrative and Support Services, including contract cleaning, logistics, and warehousing. These sectors boomed during and immediately after Covid, when e-commerce and delivery networks expanded rapidly. However, their growth has plateaued since 2023, suggesting that post-pandemic stabilisation has reduced labour demand.

Other sectors, such as Education and Arts and Entertainment, experienced brief surges in 2022 and 2023, as schools, universities, and cultural venues reopened. By 2025, these numbers had fallen dramatically, reflecting the temporary nature of those shortages.

Fundamentally, shortages of labour should not always lead to high immigration flows, even if temporary. Famously, the British Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) driver shortage in 2021 was resolved through higher wages and reforms to the sector, with the European arm of UPS overcoming the shortage through competitive salaries and an adjustment to the expected work-life balance to attract and retain staff (Thanh, 2025). Taking this as a case study in how to facilitate a transition towards domestic recruitment for vulnerable industries would bolster the nation’s ability to wean itself off immigration.

Across the board, though, the scale of legal temporary migration remains historically high — a permanent feature of the British labour market rather than a short-term fix.

A Narrowing of National Origins

The sectoral story tells only half the tale. Equally important is the transformation in the national composition of Britain’s migrant workforce. The post-Brexit era has concentrated the flow of legal migration into a handful of source countries — chiefly India, Nigeria, Pakistan, and the Philippines — each of which now dominates a different segment of the visa system.

India: the Cornerstone of Britain’s New Labour Supply

India has become the single largest source of work-related migration to the United Kingdom. Its dominance extends across both the skilled worker and graduate visa routes. Indian nationals now account for the majority of recruits in health and social care, as well as in IT, engineering, and professional services. This reflects the strength of India’s labour export infrastructure, where recruitment agencies, technical colleges, and diaspora networks funnel workers directly into British employment pipelines.

The pattern also reveals how the student visa route has evolved into a de facto feeder system for permanent settlement. Indian nationals made up 22% of all study visas in 2024 but 42% of all graduate visas, indicating that nearly half of all Indians who come to study subsequently remain in the UK workforce. What was once an education exchange has become a migration conveyor belt — from student to worker to resident — facilitated by the post-Covid relaxation of rules.

India's centrality therefore underpins both the skilled and graduate visa systems.

Nigeria: Health and Care Dependency

Nigeria has emerged as Britain's second-largest source of skilled workers, particularly in the health and care sectors. The government's decision in 2022 to extend visa sponsorship to private care homes triggered a surge in recruitment from West Africa.

This has filled critical shortages but created deep vulnerabilities. As the Dundee University case showed, the financial stability of UK institutions — from hospitals to universities — can now be undermined by economic crises in Nigeria itself. The devaluation of the Naira in 2023 (as mentioned above) left many Nigerian students and workers unable to pay tuition or accommodation fees, exposing how dependent Britain has become on fragile foreign economies.

Moreover, the Nigerian cohort has one of the highest ratios of dependants per main applicant, magnifying its demographic impact. The social and cultural consequences of such concentrated inflows are not yet fully visible, but the long-term implications for integration and local services are substantial.

Pakistan: the Bridge Between Temporary and Skilled Routes

Pakistan occupies a dual position within the new immigration framework — significant in both the temporary and skilled systems. In the Seasonal Worker Scheme, Pakistani nationals have increasingly replaced Eastern Europeans as the backbone of the agricultural workforce. At the same time, a growing number of Pakistani citizens are entering skilled work through family reunification or postgraduate study, later transitioning onto the skilled visa route.

This dual-entry structure has created a durable migration pipeline linking education, family, and employment routes. The result is a continuous chain of migration that blurs the distinction between temporary and permanent settlement.

The Philippines: the Enduring Medical Supplier

The Philippines remains the UK’s most stable and professional source of healthcare labour. Filipino nationals, concentrated almost entirely in nursing and allied health professions, have long been a mainstay of NHS recruitment.

Bilateral recruitment agreements between London and Manila have maintained a steady inflow even as other nationalities fluctuate. Filipino migrants tend to have higher retention rates and lower incidences of visa abuse compared to other groups, but their dependence on remittance economies makes the UK vulnerable to external pressures.

The Disappearance of Eastern Europe

Perhaps the most striking change since 2021 is not who has arrived, but who has disappeared. Under freedom of movement, millions of EU citizens from Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria formed the backbone of Britain’s low-wage economy. Their near-total absence from the new visa data marks a historic break with the pre-Brexit model.

In their place have come South and Central Asian workers — from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Uzbekistan — recruited through highly managed schemes and labour brokers. The effect has been to formalise what was once informal: a permanent system of state-approved low-wage migration, geographically distant and administratively complex.

Structural Consequences - From Control to Dependence

This national realignment has several long-term consequences. The government's rhetoric since 2020 has centred on "control." The points-based system was billed as a way to manage migration, prioritise skills, and replace uncontrolled EU inflows with targeted recruitment. In practice, it has achieved the opposite.

Legal migration has not only increased but diversified into multiple overlapping routes. The expansion of the skilled and temporary worker categories has allowed employers to rely indefinitely on foreign labour, while the relaxation of switching rules between study and work visas has blurred any meaningful boundary between temporary stay and permanent residence.

First, it has concentrated risk. More than 70% of all work-related visas now originate from fewer than five countries. Any disruption — a political crisis, a currency collapse, or a diplomatic dispute — could instantly affect Britain's ability to staff hospitals, farms, and care homes.

Second, it has merged the boundaries between migration categories. The same nationalities dominate the student, skilled worker, and graduate visa routes, turning what were once separate systems into a single migration pipeline. Students from India or Nigeria study in the UK, transition into work, and then move onto long-term visas, often bringing dependants. The result is a steady inflow of permanent settlers through ostensibly temporary or sector-specific channels.

Third, it has produced regional demographic concentrations. The majority of work-visa holders settle in England's large cities — Birmingham, Leicester, Manchester, and London — reinforcing existing community networks and pressures on housing and services. The risk of importing sectarian tensions from abroad, already visible in the 2022 Leicester riots, is magnified when large numbers arrive from areas of the world divided by religious or ethnic conflict.

Fourth, it has exposed the UK to the same vulnerabilities seen in the student visa system. An overreliance on high-fee international recruits may bring short-term fiscal relief but creates long-term instability. When global conditions shift — as with the Nigerian currency crisis or Indian job market fluctuations — British institutions are left exposed.

What began as an attempt to rationalise immigration has turned into an open invitation for continuous inflows, justified by short-term labour shortages but entrenched by long-term economic dependence. The parallel growth of the Graduate Visa route has amplified this effect, effectively transforming the UK's education system into a global recruitment agency.

Summary

The 2021–2025 data presents a clear picture: Britain's post-Brexit immigration model has not reduced dependency on foreign labour — it has re-engineered it. Skilled worker visas are dominated by healthcare and social care roles filled by Indian, Nigerian, and Filipino nationals; temporary visas are dominated by agricultural roles filled by South and Central Asians.

The result is a bifurcated system: one half high-skilled but publicly funded, the other low-skilled and seasonal — both now deeply embedded into the functioning of the British economy. The promise of "controlled migration" has become a façade for structural dependence.

Unless serious caps are introduced and the pathways between study, work, and settlement are curtailed, the United Kingdom will remain locked into a cycle of ever-rising legal migration — not through crisis or chaos, but through the deliberate design of its own visa system.

Section 5
Changes and Consequences

Over the past 25 years, Britain's work-visa system has evolved from an administrative mechanism of attempted control into a structure of dependence. The reforms introduced since 2000 have not merely altered how foreign labour enters and performs in the United Kingdom; they have rewired the labour market, accelerated population growth, and reshaped the country's long-term demographic balance. Successive governments, each promising to impose discipline, have instead built a system that makes mass migration a permanent feature of national life. The outcomes are now visible not just in the flow of workers, but in the scale of settlement that follows.

The transformation has been gradual but relentless. Early experiments with a Points-Based System replaced discretion with calibration, laying the foundations for bureaucratic management that continues today. Later reforms, especially the post-Brexit overhaul of 2020, expanded eligibility while claiming to restore control. Each iteration has ended by broadening the routes of entry and deepening the pathways to permanence. The result is a system that, on paper, could be tightly regulated - yet functions as a permanent inflow mechanism: every "temporary" worker admitted under a five-year route is, in practice, a potential future resident.

The immediate outcome has been to entrench migration as the ordinary mechanism of labour supply. The expansion of the Skilled Worker and Health and Care Worker visas has made overseas recruitment the backbone of public services. Between 2020 and 2024 more than 1,952,000 work-related visas were issued, including dependants, rising from 168,557 in 2020 to a peak of 616,371 in 2023 before easing slightly to about 405,000 in 2024. Hospitals, care homes, and logistics networks have come to rely on this flow of labour. What was once a contingency has become a fixture: immigration policy now functions as economic policy by proxy.

Our 2017 briefing paper The Outlook for Non-EU Net Migration[40] warned that even under tighter rules, "a substantial proportion of those admitted for work do not in practice leave", and that the share remaining after five years would be large enough to sustain population growth on its own (Migration Watch, 2017).

That prediction has proved correct. In our previous analysis of Home Office Migrant Journey data, around 42 percent of non-EU workers were still in the country five years after arrival, and about 60 percent of family dependants likewise retained legal leave to remain (LTR). By comparison, only 12 percent of temporary-route migrants were still present five years later. The report concluded that "work migration generates permanent settlement flows even when formally time-limited".

Applying those persistence rates to the actual post-2020 cohorts shows the scale of what is about to occur. Using official Home Office figures, Britain admitted 125,176 main work applicants and 43,381 dependants in 2020; 239,987 mains and 91,866 dependants in 2021; 277,586 mains and 153,647 dependants in 2022; and 337,240 mains plus 279,131 dependants in 2023. Even after a partial fall in 2024, about 405,000 people entered on work routes that year. These cohorts now define the trajectory of Britain's future settled population.

Under the above framework, roughly 42 percent of main applicants and 60 percent of dependants will still hold lawful status five years after arrival. The Migrant Journey 2024[41], confirmed that around 40 percent of those still present at year five have already secured Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR). Combining those ratios yields a medium-case projection of ILR grants from each post-2020 cohort:

2020 → 2025: *31,800 ILR grants*
2021 → 2026: *62,800 grants*
2022 → 2027: *83,700 grants*
2023 → 2028: *123,900 grants*
2024 → 2029: *82,100 grants*

That totals roughly 384,000 new ILR grants between 2025 and 2029 arising solely from these five cohorts. A low-variant

40 *The Outlook for Non-EU Net Migration, Migration Watch, July 2017*

www.migrationwatchuk.org/briefing-paper/418/the-outlook-for-non-eu-net-migration-2017--2021

41 *Migrant Journey, Home Office, May 2025*

www.gov.uk/government/statistics/migrant-journey-2024-report/migrant-journey-2024-report assumption—slightly lower persistence (40 / 55 percent) and slower conversion (33 percent ILR-share)—still yields about 310,000; a high-variant (45 / 65 percent and 50 percent ILR-share) approaches 520,000. Either way, this represents a three- to four-fold increase over the pre-Brexit decade, when annual ILR grants across all routes averaged 80,000 – 100,000.

These forecasts align with what the government's own data already reveal. Settlement grants in the UK rose from 130,000 in 2023 to 173,000 in the year ending March 2025, with work-route migrants now the largest single component[43]. The pipeline created by the 2020 – 2023 surge therefore guarantees record-high ILR numbers for at least five years, even if new visa issuances fall.

The consequences are profound. Every ILR grant confers the right to remain permanently, to access public services on the same basis as citizens, and to apply for citizenship after a year. Each settled worker or family thus adds to the long-term resident population and can, in turn, sponsor further relatives. By 2028 – 2029 the post-Covid cohorts alone will have produced roughly 400,000 new permanent residents, with another 200,000 – 250,000 likely to follow in 2030 – 2031 as later conversions occur. The total ILR accrual from the 2020 – 2024 entrants are projected to exceed 600,000, equivalent to adding a city the size of Glasgow to Britain's settled population within a decade.

The fiscal and administrative strain will be considerable. The Home Office, which historically processed about 100,000 ILR cases per year in the 2010s, must now manage triple that volume. Local authorities will face parallel demands for housing and public services as each new ILR grant converts a temporary worker into an eligible resident. The illusion that these inflows are "temporary" will dissolve as the settlement pipeline matures, especially as the prominence of temporary work visas has declined, and the number of skilled work visa grants has increased. Even if future governments impose caps or raise salary thresholds, the backlog of eligible cohorts ensures that net migration will remain structurally high through the late 2020s[44].

What is as important, if not more, is the findings from the MAC report[45] on the fiscal implications of low earners having the highest stay rates; migrants initially earning less than £40,000 per year have the highest stay rates, while those earning over £125,000 exhibit the lowest — particularly over the long term. The dependence on overseas labour, but with that labour being low-paid, means the economic benefits of mass migration are vanishingly small, if not net negative. Indeed, the MAC explicitly states that accounting for care workers' higher retention rates would reduce projected fiscal benefits.

In political terms, this creates a time-lag problem. Ministers may point to reduced visa issuances, yet the official migration totals will continue to rise as existing migrants convert to ILR and then to citizenship after a period of time longer than the average parliament. The apparent failure to "bring numbers down" will reflect the cumulative effect of past policy rather than new inflows. By the time those settlement figures peak, the public narrative of control will have collapsed under the weight of its own arithmetic.

From an economic standpoint, the conversion of work visas into permanent residence reinforces low-wage dependency. Employers have little incentive to invest in domestic training when overseas labour is not only cheaper, but potentially permanent. The post-Covid system, far from substituting high-skill for low-skill labour, has embedded a service-sector model reliant on continuous recruitment abroad. As we observed as early as 2017, "unless government sets firm caps and enforces return, work-related migration will remain the primary engine of population growth"[46].

The social implications are equally significant. Concentrated inflows into particular cities, such as London, Birmingham, Manchester, Leicester, are reinforcing community clustering and straining local services. Because dependants now account for nearly half of all arrivals on work routes, the pattern of settlement increasingly resembles that of family migration rather than individual labour mobility. Over time, these clusters will influence a range of policy areas from housing markets to school demographics and local politics. Migration Watch's higher "family retention" rate of 60 percent is already visible in the Home Office data: even as worker inflows slowed in 2024, family members continued to arrive in large numbers under Health and Care sponsorships before policy tightening took effect.

What emerges is a picture of demographic momentum that no government can quickly reverse. The official data and MW's own projections converge: Britain's post-2020 visa framework has pre-programmed the largest expansion of permanent migration in modern history. Unless rules are changed to extend the qualifying period or restrict settlement rights, the ILR surge of 2025 – 2029 will embed a new baseline of population growth that endures well into the 2030s. By then, the migrants admitted under Boris Johnson's "Points-Based System" will be full British citizens, their families settled, and the promise of "taking back control" consigned to the statistical record.

Conclusion

Any government committed to reducing immigration must begin with the clearest lesson of the past twenty years: Britain's work-visa system is no longer a tool of labour management but a machine of population growth.

A cap on the number of work visas issued each year, across all industries, is absolutely essential; and while Migration Watch has explained in a previous paper the necessity and mechanisms for doing so, this report concludes with the application of this method to work visas (Migration Watch, 2025).

The data in this report is unequivocal. Between 2021 and 2023, annual work visas surged from a typical level of 120,000 to over 600,000 - the highest level ever recorded. The Health and Care Worker visa, introduced in 2020 as a limited measure, has now issued over 710,000 grants on its own. Most strikingly, by 2023, dependants overtook main applicants, reaching 260,000 against 225,000 workers. In other words, the "work" route became a de facto family-migration route, with a dependency ratio of 1.16 dependants per worker, unprecedented in British migration history.

This report sets out the structural story: this was not a freak spike, but the predictable outcome of the way in which the post-Brexit points-based system was devised, which - despite its rhetoric of control - functioned as a vast liberalisation. Salary thresholds were lowered, the skill requirement dropped, and employers were given broad sponsorship autonomy. Sectors such as health, social care, and agriculture rapidly shifted from temporary or EU-supplied labour to global recruitment pipelines dominated by India, Nigeria, Pakistan, and the Philippines. As the report shows, India alone has accounted for over 1.4 million work visas since 2005, and more than 160,000 Skilled Worker visas in 2023 alone. While many labourers on these visas will have returned to their home nations, many will not - and Britain's population growth has rapidly accelerated as a result.

Any attempt to reduce migration must therefore begin with the routes driving this explosion. The first and central proposal of this report is the introduction of hard caps on the core work-visa categories: the Skilled Worker visa and the Health and Care Worker visa. Without numerical caps, the system simply absorbs demand - whether from NHS trusts, private care homes, universities, recruitment agencies, or multinational firms. This report demonstrates that this dynamic is precisely what produced the 2021–2023 surge. A capped system would mirror the Tier 2 General cap used relatively successfully between 2010 and 2018, when Certificate of Sponsorship (CoS) allocations were limited to 20,700 per year and were routinely oversubscribed. A more stringent approach should be considered at this stage: monthly allocations, combined with a salary-based and sector-based triage, would ensure that visas go to the highest-value roles rather than function as a general labour-supply mechanism.

The second major proposal, supported by the data in Section Three, is that dependants must be controlled. This report shows dependants rising from around 45,000 in 2019 to over 270,000 in 2023, transforming the demographic profile of the work route. The logic of the system thus became self-defeating: recruiting one care worker often produced two or three new residents. The 2024 restriction on dependants for care workers reduced numbers sharply in 2024–25 and should be retained.

The policy options to go further, such as counting dependants against CoS allocations, imposing additional caps, or prohibiting dependants entirely for roles below a set salary threshold, follow naturally from the evidence. Without restrictions, dependants alone will continue to add hundreds of thousands annually.

Yet caps and dependant controls cannot stand without eligibility reform. As the draft illustrates in detail, the 2020 framework dropped the skill threshold, opening the Skilled Worker route to non-graduate roles and generating a structural shift from temporary to permanent migration. Work visas became long-term residence programmes rather than time-limited labour flows. Reversing this means restoring stricter skill criteria and ensuring that low-wage labour shortages are met—where absolutely necessary—through short-term, non-settlement visas, not by putting care workers, warehouse staff, or classroom assistants onto ILR-granting routes.

This connects directly to the need for a reinstated and much more rigorous Resident Labour Market Test (RLMT). The abolition of the RLMT in 2020 severed a core mechanism of domestic labour protection. Employers moved directly to overseas recruitment rather than advertising locally, especially in city-region labour markets where domestic unemployment or inactivity remained high. A serious RLMT must require employers to provide DWP-verified evidence that local candidates are unavailable, with longer advertising periods and formal labour-market scrutiny. Care, teaching, health, hospitality, and logistics roles should not be sponsored abroad without first exhausting domestic recruitment.

A related pillar is the requirement that employers demonstrate domestic training investment. One of the clearest structural findings of this report is that Britain has replaced training with importation. This is particularly stark in health and social care: those two sectors alone now dominate the Skilled Worker route, and both reflect decades of state failure to maintain training pipelines. A visa-allocation system that rewards employers who invest in apprenticeships, qualifications, and domestic recruitment is not simply desirable—it is the only sustainable way to reduce long-term dependence on migration.

Compounding the issue, compliance and enforcement have been inconsistently applied in the preceding years. HMRC–Home Office data sharing must be tightened so that migrant workers are actually paid the salaries claimed on sponsorship forms. In sectors such as care, evidence of pay inflation on paper but not in practice has been widespread. Sponsors who breach conditions should lose allocations and, where necessary, their licence entirely.

No single sub-route has reshaped Britain's migration profile more dramatically than the Health and Care Worker Visa. Many of the record-high inflows came not from high-skilled global talent but from large-scale importation of care workers and care assistants, roles historically filled domestically or through EU free movement. Reform to work visas must include retaining the dependant ban, raising salary thresholds cautiously, tightening English-language and qualification requirements, and moving towards regional, NHS -linked, or agency-style sponsorship to eliminate the proliferation of small private sponsors.

Beyond route-specific changes, migration is evidently driven by domestic policy failures beyond the Home Office. This is perhaps the most important structural point in the report. Multiple industries rely on large-scale migration, but no government has taken action to address the root cause, which is the poor provision of home-grown talent and skills; for example, the number of medical students trained each year is capped by the government (Commons Library, 2023). Unless all departments are aligned behind a legal obligation to reduce migration, the Home Office will continue firefighting while others expand demand. A statutory duty of cross-government coherence is essential.

Finally, the ILR pipeline must be reevaluated in the light of this evidence. The cohorts admitted between 2020 and 2023 will, even under conservative estimates, generate around 384,000 ILR grants between 2025 and 2029 - and potentially over 500,000 under higher variants. This dynamic ensures that even if visa issuances fall, population growth will remain high for years due to past admissions. This is the political trap created by the post-Brexit design.

A credible plan, therefore, is not merely about lowering numbers next year: it must structurally reform the system so that Britain no longer defaults to overseas labour. Caps, eligibility tightening, stricter enforcement, and cross-government discipline are the minimum conditions for restoring control. Without them, the “Boriswave” dynamic identified in this report will remain the defining feature of Britain’s migration landscape: high inflows, high dependency, and a permanent settlement pipeline disguised as a work-visa system