All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Science and Policy APPG

EVENT SUMMARY

UK Migration – understanding the data

The meeting on 16 April 2024 of the Social Science and Policy APPG on UK Migration data was addressed by Jay Lindop (Deputy Director of the ONS), Madeleine Sumption (Director of the Oxford Migration Observatory) and Sunder Katwala (Director of British Future).

The following is a summary of key points.

The UN defines a migrant as 'someone who changes their country of residence for 12 months or more.'

Different calculations

The accuracy of immigration statistics has improved since moving from the **International Passenger Survey** which recorded the 'intentions' of how long people were going to stay or leave the UK rather than how long people actually remained in or out of the UK.

Equally, the Home Office calculates movement in and out of the UK by visas granted which is an on-the-day figure rather than tracking the movement of people in the longer-term.

Migration figures are further complicated by the fact that migrants with settled status can leave the UK for two years without losing their settled status.

In contrast to the Home Office, the ONS calculates migration on people leaving or entering the UK for at least 12 months. It publishes annual provisional figures (for the year ending June 2023, the provisional estimate of net migration is 672,000) and at the end of the 12 months this estimate will be updated.

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Student numbers

40% of all non-EU migration is for study (for example at UK universities). In this area, we are seeing a change in student behaviours.

Of those who arrived in the year ending June 2018, after two years around two-thirds had left after their studies.

However, the latest data, for those who arrived in the year ending June 2021, suggests that after two years only around one-third had left, while a further 44% had switched to a different visa type. This includes those switching to the Graduate Route, which allows at least two years' work in the UK (or three years for PhDs).

A further driver of the numbers is family accompaniment. In 2019 only 6% of students brought family with them. That is now about a third.

Of those coming for work, a third brought dependants. That is now around a half.

Impact of policy on migration

For the Oxford Migration Observatory, the drivers of net migration figures are multi-factoral and hard to connect to specific outcomes. Indeed, the numbers often change without any policy changes at all.

Overall, though, the numbers appear to be declining. The Home Office believes that the 300,000 people who were granted visas last year would not be eligible under this year's new rules on dependents of students. How that will translate into net figures remains to be seen.

In terms of the social and economic impacts of inward migration, the composition of the migrant intake is often more important than the actual numbers: 100 refugees will impact differently from 100 students or 100 skilled IT workers. Social impacts and impacts on the housing market depend to some extent on the total number, while impacts on public finances, the labour market or productivity depend much more on who is coming rather than how many.

The number of asylum seekers is less than 10% of overall immigration. However successful deterrence might become, it is unlikely to have as large an impact on net migration figures as measures affecting students or workers.

Public attitudes to migration

British Future's analysis of public attitudes data noted the slight shift to a more positive attitude after the Brexit referendum, perhaps from a sense that the UK once more had the means to control immigration.

More recently, the high level of dissatisfaction with the way Government is handling the issue of migration has negatively impacted attitudes. This is as much a measure of trust in Government as it is about feelings on immigration.

Lack of faith in the Government's handling of the issue has implications for trust in data. Immigration sceptics are inclined to dismiss the figures as unrepresentative samples and to extrapolate from the uncertainties that there is no certainty at all.

The key determinant for confidence in immigration policy (and by extension, trust in immigration figures) is a visible sense of control (or no visible sense of a lack of control).

In 2022, the year of peak migration, the proportion of the public wanting to see overall numbers reduced had fallen to 42%, the lowest level of support for reductions on record. For more information, please see British Future's public attitudes tracker.

The latest figures show 52% of the UK population want a reduction in immigration while 40% say they think that a net of 600,000 migrants a year is too low.

When those people who want to reduce immigration were asked which groups specifically should be restricted, people did not identify doctors or nurses, care workers or fruit pickers, but rather bankers.

Generally, sympathy for people crossing in small boats has remained fairly steady but attitudes are gently turning negative – now at 40% for and 40% against, distributed by age, education and political orientation.

On Rwanda, there is never a simple majority for or against. The median person wants a system that will consider failed claims for removal but bring back successful claimants.

International comparisons

The UK has gone from being a comparatively sceptical outlier to being a comparatively confident country about immigration despite the low trust in Government handling of the issue.

There is higher confidence in Australia, but Sweden has gone from most confident to most concerned. In Canada the issue is newly contested. In France, confidence in integration is low.

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Immigration from India

Of the 200,000 inward migrants from India, the largest portion comprises international students, then skilled workers (in IT mainly), and then care workers. Family members and dependents are fewer, but they are more likely to stay permanently than workers.

Geographical variations in attitudes to migration

Scotland has a strong consensus and support for reducing immigration has halved to three out of 10. This is probably because people do not want to be the kind of person who calls for reductions in migrants.

There are big differences within every region. There are examples of areas that are at least 20 miles away from a district heavily impacted with new migration, where attitudes are more sceptical than the impacted area itself. This could be due to having the visibility of migration without the contact with migrants.

Statistical errors and anomalies

Some statistical anomalies can be explained by people applying to come to the UK without then taking up the opportunity of doing so – or they applied, came and then left again.

Also, if an EU citizen has settled status in the UK, they can leave for two years without that impacting their settled status.

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