

2024 GENERAL ELECTION BRIEF

Manifesto analysis - Immigration

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The background

As highlighted in our earlier topical [brief](#), immigration has been a dominant topic in the debate both in the run-up to the campaign and during it. This is partly driven by the near-record-high levels of net migration into the UK, which was near 700,000 in 2023. This is much higher than the pre-Covid average of 240,000, itself already substantially higher than successive governments' targets.

Net migration has a significantly different pattern and level in Scotland relative to that of the UK as a whole. The UK has had significantly positive and growing net migration since the early 1990s, something that has only been true for Scotland since the 2000s. It is often said that Scotland's attitudes to migration are different to those of the UK more broadly; Migration Policy Scotland's recent survey on attitudes towards immigration in Scotland finds that the level of support for reducing immigration has grown in Scotland, although it remains lower than in the UK as a whole.

The extent to which Scotland receives migrants that come to the UK has varied hugely over the last few decades, but over the period has averaged at around 6%, significantly lower than the Scottish population share of 8.4%.

The immigration system is fully reserved, and so policies in this area are decided by the members elected at the end of this campaign – although, as we'll see, some of the proposals are to decouple

Scotland's immigration system from Westminster.

Regular immigration to the UK and Scotland in particular

There are two main distinct camps within which most parties fall in terms of their proposals. The **Conservatives**, **Labour** and **Reform UK** all want to reduce the numbers of net migration to varying degrees; the **SNP**, the **Lib Dems**, the **Scottish Greens**, **Alba** and the **Green Party of England and Wales** all propose measures which would increase the level of net migration, although with no commitment on numbers. In fact, **Reform UK** are the only party talking about a specific number, with their leader saying he would like zero net migration.

The **Conservatives** have said they would introduce a binding, legal cap on migration. This would be voted on by Parliament, and the party has said it would fall year-on-year in every year of the Parliament. The manifesto is extremely vague on details of how this would be operated, but it seems to be predicated on the Migration Advisory Committee estimating the "ideal" level of migration, as well as which areas would require more or less of it. Obviously an enforced cap on visa issuances would reduce levels of migration, but if combined with an approach that tries to balance sectoral needs explicitly through a third-party body, it could lead to very thorny difficulties should the needs of a sector change during the course of the year. That is to say nothing of whether a body like the MAC would have the required data to make meaningful judgements on the desirability of a specific level of migration.

The Conservatives also propose a number of discouraging measures for inward migrants, such as forcing them to undergo a health check; increasing the thresholds automatically; increasing all visa fees and health surcharges; and removing student discounts. The **Scottish Conservative** manifesto, for its part, also wants to ensure rural parts of Scotland get a larger share of migrants to reverse depopulation, though there is no detail on how that would be achieved or enforced.

Labour have no specific target on net migration, but want it to be reduced. Given that so much of the current high numbers comes from special schemes related to Hong Kong and Ukraine, this seems like it will inevitably happen regardless. The manifesto points to a reform of the points-based system, with 'appropriate' restrictions on visas and linking immigration with skills policy – all quite vague in terms of mechanisms and impacts.

One of the interesting areas highlighted by Labour is the fact that sectors tend to stay on the shortage occupation list for long periods of time – which they want to address through having a plan to train up new workers through a framework with skills bodies, the Industrial Strategy Council and DWP. Talk of joining up strategies might sound good, but it's unclear how that will be delivered.

Reform UK have a number of proposals which in many cases sound more specific, but have either less detail than they appear or are missing key policy determinants. For example, they propose a 'freeze on

non-essential immigration' – no definition of what exactly constitutes those essential skills or how they would be determined is provided.

The same is true for their proposed Employer Immigration Tax, which would mean National Insurance Contributions on the employer side at 20% for foreign workers rather than the current rate of 13.8%. No detail is given as to whether this would apply to new arrivals, immediately to all foreign workers in the country, or to some other subset. They estimate this would bring in around £4 billion a year. But it's really difficult to know how this has been arrived at – using something like the median salary in the UK, this would imply that around 2 ¼ million workers would be subject to the tax. That's much higher than the number of new workers starting in each year, but also less than a quarter of all foreign workers in the country – and certainly very low even after accounting for dual nationals and the health and care exemptions mentioned in the manifesto.

Some of the other minor policies announced by Reform UK are for things that don't really happen or are outlawed already. People subject to immigration controls have no recourse to public funds and there's a minimum of five years for most people to obtain indefinite leave to remain, so they already cannot claim benefits during this five year period. As for health tourism, it's [British residents who are going abroad](#) in record numbers to get medical treatment and therefore engaging in so-called 'health tourism' rather the other way around – which is unsurprising given the large waiting lists in the UK.

The **SNP** wants devolution of powers to create a bespoke migration system for Scotland, with text around it implying it would want to increase migration into Scotland. This is complemented by a call for a rural visa scheme for Scotland, which appears to be similar to what the Scottish Conservatives propose and has equally little detail. The SNP also wants an expanded shortage occupation list, and to give asylum seekers the right to work.

The **Lib Dems** have no specific policies on the overall number of migrants, but instead propose a decentralised approach across government where visa policy is spread across multiple departments rather than in the Home Office. Combined with the exemption from the Immigration Skills Charge (itself a misnomer, as it's essentially a visa fee by any other name) for NHS and care staff and the reversal of the restrictions placed by the government on income thresholds for dependants, this would likely lead to higher numbers of net migration than otherwise would be the case. The Lib Dems also want to give asylum seekers the right to work.

The **Scottish Greens**, like the SNP, want the Scottish Parliament to have powers to set its own immigration system. They also want the total removal of income requirements for spousal visas.

Alba's proposals are for Scotland to be part of the EU single market through membership of EFTA, which would entail both inward and outward freedom of movement. However, these proposals seem focussed on an independent Scotland, and therefore it's not clear what they would advocate in the meantime.

The **Green Party of England and Wales** wants a simplified system of visa applications, with a reduction in fees and abolition of additional quasi-taxes such as the immigration health surcharge.

They also want to ease the ability of migrants to bring dependants, including fully removing spousal income requirements.

Non-visa-based immigration into the UK

This section includes approaches to English Channel boat crossings, as well as broader asylum and refugee policy and processing.

The **Conservatives** have pledged to engage in a 'relentless, continual process of permanently removing illegal migrants to Rwanda' until 'the boats are stopped'. This is a policy heavily predicated on deterrence, as the Rwanda scheme has a much lower capacity than the number of Channel crossings in any of the recent years.

The manifesto says that a Conservative government would be prepared to disregard a European Court of Human Rights decision – which would break international law, with the reputational damage that comes with it. Additional Conservative proposals include fully implementing the Illegal Migration Act into force, with all claims processed in six months and end the use of hotels; and reform asylum rules by holding an internal summit.

Labour's plan is to drop the Rwanda scheme and focus instead on using counter-terrorism style powers to disrupt those involved in facilitating the people smuggling trade, as well as work collaboratively with the EU to tackle boat crossings. A multi-country approach is probably more likely to succeed, though it's hard to assess whether this will truly work in practice. Some of the other proposals, such as employing additional staff to clear the asylum processing backlog and creating a fast-track unit, are welcome steps in practical solutions – though it's unclear from the outside if the numbers talked about will be enough to solve the processing challenges.

The Rwanda scheme is a clear dividing line across parties. **Reform UK** do not mention it, but appear to at least support the aims of the regime. On the opposite end of the spectrum, in addition to Labour, the **Lib Dems**, the **SNP**, the **Scottish Greens**, and the **Greens of England and Wales** all outright call for its cancellation, whereas **Alba** – while not explicitly mentioning it – call the UK Government's asylum policy 'inhumane'.

Reform UK's platform is focussed heavily on stopping boat crossings, and include zero 'illegal' immigrants being resettled in the UK; creating a new department in charge of immigration; taking migrants who cross the Channel 'back to France' – seemingly with no agreement from French authorities – and withdrawing from the European Convention on Human Rights. For context, only two countries in Europe are not members or observers – Russia and Belarus, both widely considered international pariah states – of a convention which has for over 70 years protected rights on family reunification, limits on detention and right of return.

Our next event

Fraser of Allander Institute Manifesto Analysis Webinar

Tuesday 2 July 2024

16:45 - 18:00 (BST) | Online

Come and join the FAI team to discuss all of the manifestos released by the parties who are standing for election in Scotland in the General Election on 4th July. We'll be focussing on what the manifestos mean for Scotland, and, in particular, how devolved responsibilities are reflected in the parties' proposals. Which tax policies are relevant For Scotland? What do the proposals mean for devolved funding? Why are many of the parties using slightly dodgy numbers? Come along to find out, and ask the team any questions you have about particular announcements.

This will bring our general election analysis to a close before polling day - so come along to get your questions answered!

This webinar is part of a project funded by the [Nuffield Foundation](#). The views expressed in the webinar are those of the Fraser of Allander Institute and not necessarily the Foundation.

[Register here](#)

Registered attendees will be sent the join details for the webinar by email on 2 July 2024.

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