

Written evidence submitted by British Future (CHA0055)

1. About British Future

1.1 British Future is an independent, non-partisan think tank that works for a confident and inclusive Britain that is fair and welcoming to all. In the eight years since we were founded we have developed a unique understanding of public attitudes to immigration. We also work with business, local authorities, faith and civil society organisations to put in place policy and practices that secure public confidence in the immigration system, bridge community divides and support local integration. In 2017-2018 British Future and Hope note hate undertook the National Conversation on Immigration, the largest ever consultation on this subject. Its evidence fed into a 2018 Home Affairs Committee *Immigration Policy: basis for building for consensus*.

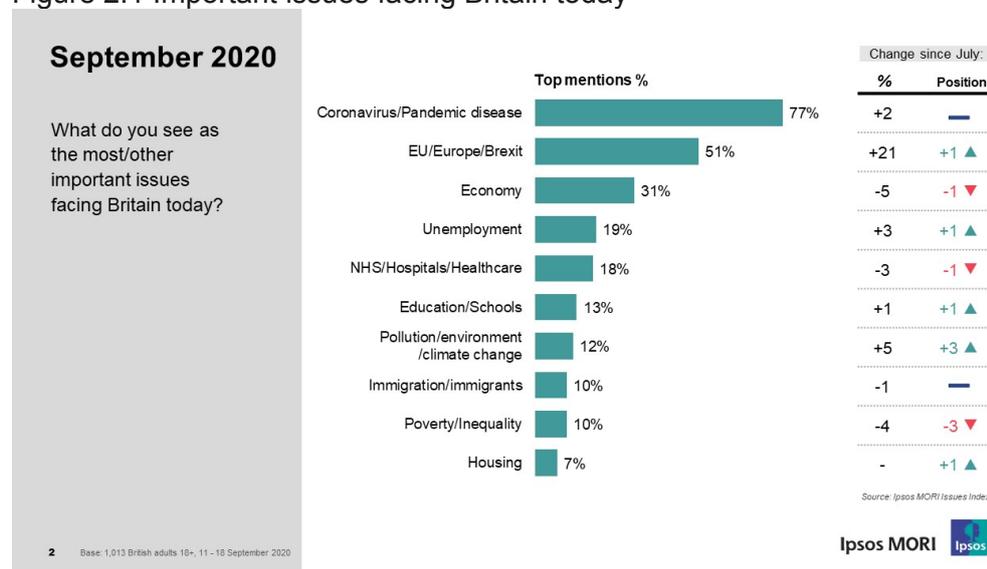
1.2 This evidence draws as quantitative and qualitative research from a number of sources, including British Future's own work, namely:

- findings from the [National Conversation on Immigration](#)
- four visits to Folkestone to undertake interviews held between 2018 and 2020
- three online discussions with Folkestone residents undertaken in October 2020 as part of the [Talk/Together](#) project.

2. Overall attitudes to immigration

2.1 Falling overall salience of immigration From the mid-1990s until 2017 immigration was a highly salient issue among the public, rarely falling out of the top three issues of public concern in the Ipsos MORI monthly Issues Index. From 2005 onwards, much of the focus of this concern centred on migration from the EU, rather than asylum. Since 2017, the overall salience of immigration has fallen; it was only 8th in the Ipsos MORI Issues Index in September 2020. Other research supports this trend, as well as suggesting that public attitudes to immigration have become a little more positive since the EU referendum¹.

Figure 2.1 Important issues facing Britain today



2.2 Asylum rather than EU migration is higher on the public agenda in 2020. While overall salience of immigration has fallen, asylum – in relation to channel crossings – is the issue

¹ See reports from the Shifting Ground study, a longitudinal study which has tracked the same people since 2016.

that is raised when people are asked open questions on immigration. This is the main change we have seen since 2017-2018

2.3 Although overall salience has fallen and there been a shift to asylum as an issue of concern, the themes that people raise in discussions about immigration are broadly similar to what they were in 2017-2018. Most people are ‘balancers’ and have moderate and constructive views and see both pressures and gains from migration. People want immigration to be controlled, those who come to the UK to make a contribution, and for migration policy to be fair and compassionate. Control means different things to different people - UK sovereignty, a selective immigration system, criminal record checks, control over numbers, competent immigration enforcement, data on who lives in the UK. The online debate about immigration rarely represents the views of this moderate ‘balancer’ middle.

2.5 Evidence from the National Conversation on Immigration and our 2020 discussions suggest that the public want asylum migration to be controlled, refugees to make a contribution, and those who arrive in the UK to be treated compassionately and fairly.

2.6 There much ‘balancing’ in what people say. They are sympathetic to the plight of refugees and they know that many of those crossing the Channel had fled war and persecution from countries such as Iran and Syria. There is an acknowledgement that people who get into tiny boats must be desperate. Many people admitted feeling torn or confused about this highly visible issue; in the discussion we have often been asked “*where are the women and children?*” In Folkestone, people are confused and torn about the use of Napier Barracks as temporary accommodation. They don’t want asylum seekers to be homeless in a pandemic but are concerns about health risks and a lack of consultation and information about this accommodation.

2.7 Compassion is often balanced with concerns that the Government is unable to control the UK’s borders. While people accept that those who were crossing the Channel had fled real dangers in Iran and Syria, they were also perceived to be crossing Europe to take advantage of the UK’s supposedly generous benefits system. That asylum-seekers are barred from working in the UK is not something that most people know, as the quote below shows.

“I know why they have left Iran and Syria, but it is difficult to understand why they are here when they have passed through so many countries.” (Folkestone resident, interviewed October 2020).

2.8 A [YouGov poll of August 2020](#) on channel crossings shows that most people have this balanced view. 19% of people have a great deal of sympathy towards migrants who have crossed the Channel, 25% had a fair amount of sympathy, 22% had not much sympathy and just over a quarter (27%) have no sympathy at all². That is a consistent pattern. After the drowning of the toddler Alan Kurdi, a quarter of people took action to support refugees, for example donating money or signing petitions, while 30% said UK should take no refugees at all. In between are the ‘balancers’. They include the 25% of people in the YouGov poll who have a fair amount of sympathy to migrants crossing the channel. This group will be sympathetic to the plight of refugees, but also want the UK and France to have an effective asylum system that combines control and fairness. The quarter who say that they have ‘not much sympathy’ can accept the principle of protecting refugees but would prioritise controls and want France to take firmer action.

² YOUGOV poll of 3,163 GB adults, August 11 2020

3. Policy solutions

3.1 There are many reasons that the Government has to act to reduce the numbers of people crossing the Channel. First and foremost, there is an immediate risk to life for those making these journeys. Maintaining public confidence in the asylum system is also important. However, there are no easy solutions to reducing the numbers of people crossing the channel and it is to be welcomed that the Home Secretary has acknowledged this point. Over-promising and then failing to deliver only undermines public confidence in the Government's ability to manage immigration

3.2 There is limited scope for action once people are actually in the water – by that point, saving lives is paramount. Solutions lie on land: in asylum-seekers countries of origin, in points of arrival France and in the UK. Public policy should be informed by robust evidence, including an understanding of the experiences of people who have made these journeys.

3.3 Understanding the drivers of this migratory movement is essential in developing policy to reduce the numbers of people crossing the channel. These drivers include push factors in asylum-seekers countries of origin, conditions in countries of transit and in France, the actions of people smugglers and traffickers, and pull factors relating to the UK which encourage people to make this dangerous crossing. Significant drivers of migration through this route include:

- conflict and human rights abuse in countries of origin, including conflict/instability which has climate change as a contributory factor.
- unemployment, as well as conflict that has high unemployment as a causal factor of migration. Youth unemployment in Iraq, for example, is around 20% and there have been continued protests on this issue
- lack of viable means of support ie. work in countries of first asylum/transit countries such as Turkey and Lebanon³
- the actions of traffickers and smugglers
- the presence of immediate family in the UK, as well as other contacts and friends.
- prior familiarity with the English language
- perceptions that UK labour market is more open and that it is easier to find work in this country, compared with countries such as Greece or France⁴.

3.4 Many of those crossing the channel are from Iran. The refugee recognition rate for Iranian asylum-seekers in the UK is high with 65% of applicants granted refugee status in 2019. Of the 790 asylum appeals in that year, 65% were upheld. This suggests that fear of persecuting is a significant factor in driving migration through the channel. While those crossing the channel may have a 'well-founded fear of persecution' and qualify for refugee status, work and a viable means of support are basic human needs.

3.5 The numbers of asylum applications have been constant in recent years, although numbers were higher in 2019, with 45,537 applications lodged with the Home Office in that year⁵. Asylum applications fell in 2020, with 16,354 applications in the first two quarters of 2020, compared with 21,304 in the previous year. The presentation of Home Office administrative data does not enable any conclusions to be drawn about the impact of channel crossings on the number of asylum applications in the UK.

³ Betts, A. and Collier P. (2018) *Refuge: Rethinking Refugee Policy in a Changing World*, Oxford: OUP.

⁴ Hatton. T. (2011) *Seeking asylum: trends and policies in OECD countries*, London: Centre for Economic Policy Research.

⁵ Home Office Immigration Statistics 27 August 2020 release. Figures include dependents.

3.6 Policy responses need to address drivers of migration, including the unemployment and climate change that creates political instability. This should be a major focus of the work of the newly merged Foreign Office and Department for International Development.

3.7 It is essential that the actions of criminals who put lives at risk are disrupted.

3.8 Some of those arriving on boats have family in the UK and for them safe and legal routes to the UK would prevent them making these dangerous journeys. At present the UK is bound by the Dublin Agreement which is likely to cease to apply after December 2020. It is essential that the UK negotiates an arrangement with the EU that enable transfers in and out of the UK, including for those who have immediate family in this country.

3.9 But not all migrants crossing from France have family in the UK; the English language and the view that it is easier to get a job in the UK than France are also pull factors. Those fleeing war and persecution need to have confidence in the French asylum system. More resources are also needed to support integration in France and the UK Government should be willing to contribute to make this happen.

3.10 In the UK, asylum applications need to be processed more rapidly, with those who have no claim to asylum removed quickly from the UK rather than left in limbo for many years. Rapid determination of asylum applications and removal of those who have been refused is essential, both to enable to integration of those who are granted refugee status, and to maintain public confidence in the asylum system. It is a matter of concern that delays in the system are increasing, with 38,756 asylum applicants and dependents had waited more than six months for a decision as of August 2020. Asylum transparency data suggests that there were 100,612 cases pending as of Q2 2019. This is an unsatisfactory situation, for applicants and wider society. While 6,199 refused asylum-seekers returned to their home countries in 2010, there were only 656 voluntary returns or removals in 2019 with asylum transparency data suggesting 39,932 removal cases were pending in 2019.

3.11 Integration is also key to maintaining public confidence in the asylum system. Those who come here should be allowed to improve their English while they are waiting for a decision. Regulations in England and Northern Ireland currently prevent asylum-seekers studying. Allowing asylum-seekers who have waited for more than six months for a decision to work would also make sense. Both measures would increase the employment rate for refugees and address public concerns that refugees are drawn to the UK to claim benefits. The Government may also wish to consider granting leave to remain to clear the very large 100,000+ backlog of asylum cases, enabling those return is extremely unlikely to integration into the UK.

November 2020