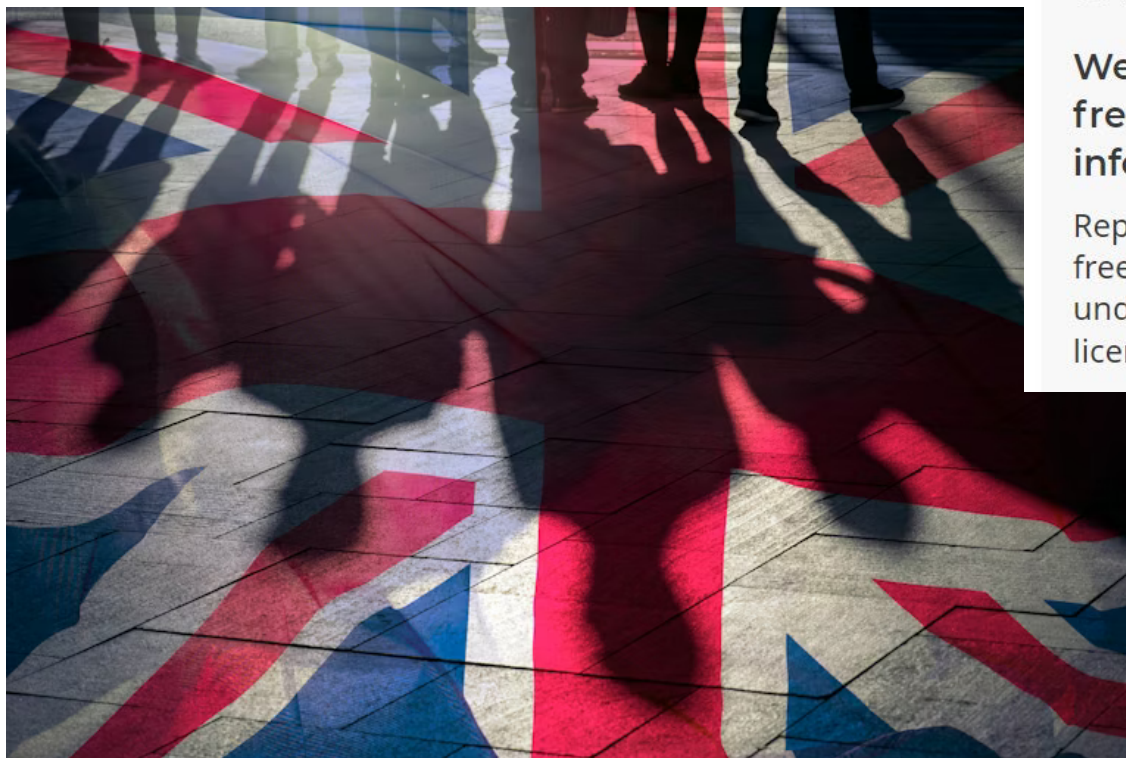




We believe in the
free flow of
information

Republish our articles for
free, online or in print,
under Creative Commons
licence.



Savvapanf Photo/Shutterstock

The UK could make migrants wait up to 20 years before becoming settled – making it one of the longest waits in the world

Published: April 10, 2026 5.47pm CEST

<https://theconversation.com/the-uk-could-make-migrants-wait-up-to-20-years-before-becoming-settled-making-it-one-of-the-longest-waits-in-the-world-279036>

The UK government is planning to make it significantly harder for migrants to obtain permanent residence. If the proposals go ahead, the UK would become more restrictive than most other high-income democracies. In the case of refugees it would create a situation that is arguably without precedent among peer countries.

The UK's home secretary, Shabana Mahmood, intends to double the qualifying period for indefinite leave to remain (ILR) (the UK's form of permanent residence) from five to ten years for most migrants, and increase it up to 20 for some.

Eligibility requirements would also tighten. Migrants would need a clean criminal record (removing the previous 12-month sentence threshold), a higher English language standard and earnings above £12,570 per year for at least three years. This will disproportionately affect those least likely to be in full-time employment, including dependants of people on work visas, family visa holders and refugees.

The ten-year baseline for settlement would then be adjusted up or down based on individual circumstances. High-skilled workers, including NHS nurses and doctors, or those earning above £125,140, for instance, could qualify after five or three years respectively. Those on family visas (such as those married to a British citizen) or who are judged to be making efforts at “integration” such as by volunteering in the community could qualify after five to seven years. Those who have claimed benefits would have to wait up to 20 years, while for those who have entered the country illegally or overstayed their visa would have to wait up to 30 years to settle.

Read more: [Labour’s plan for migrants to ‘earn’ permanent residency turns belonging into an endless exam](#)

For low-skilled workers, the qualifying period would start at 15 years. For refugees it would be 20, with no reductions available unless the person works or studies. In this case, their status would convert to a Protection Work and Study visa, subject to review every 30 months.

The government has cited the increasing number of people granted settlement as one of the drivers behind the reforms. This figure has been rising since 2017, reaching 163,000 in the year ending June 2025. The Home Office projects this figure will increase significantly over the next five years.

The reforms are also framed as a response to irregular migration. The government has cited the Danish model as inspiration, arguing that the longer timeframe will “strongly discourage” entry without documents and reduce the “pull factors” attracting people to the UK. However, research suggests that deterrence-based policies like this are a weak tool for reducing immigration: decisions to migrate are driven primarily by conditions in countries of origin, not by entitlements in destination countries.

Read more: [Is the Rwanda plan acting as a deterrent? Here’s what the evidence says about this approach](#)

The Home Office has claimed these amendments do not require legislation, meaning they do not need to be put to a parliamentary vote. But opponents have signalled the intention to force a symbolic vote to make their views clear. Much of the concern has to do with the plans to apply the changes retrospectively.

An international outlier

These proposals would make the UK an outlier compared to other major economies. In the EU, the closest equivalent to ILR is the long-term resident status for third country nationals. This requires people to live in the EU on a valid visa for at least five years, and confers long-term residence with limited conditions. This exists alongside national schemes, such as Italy's Permesso di Soggiorno UE per soggiornanti di lungo periodo and Germany's Niederlassungserlaubnis that follow a similar approach.

Denmark and Ireland are the only two EU member states that opted out of the EU-level scheme. These countries have special arrangements for immigration and asylum policy (just like the UK did, before Brexit). They set their thresholds at eight and five years respectively, with Denmark's reducible to four in some cases.

The UK government claims that making refugee status temporary and increasing the time for permanent residency contributed to asylum applications reaching a 40-year low in Denmark in 2025. However, this drop coincided with broader EU-wide trends in asylum flows, making it difficult to attribute the decline to domestic policy changes alone.

Among Anglophone countries, the picture is similar. The US green card confers permanent residence without a formal minimum years requirement. Though in practice, the vast majority of employment-based applicants previously held a temporary visa. Canada has no blanket time requirements, and refugees admitted through resettlement schemes can obtain permanent residency immediately.

Raising the standard qualifying period for permanent residence to ten years would make the UK more restrictive than most other comparable democracies in Europe and North America, and one of the strictest globally. Extending it to 20 years for refugees would make the UK's approach unprecedented among peer countries.

These new requirements are closer to those of some of the hardest countries to achieve permanent residency such as Qatar and Japan, which require 20 and ten years respectively, for most cases.

Evidence shows 'pull factors' such as healthcare benefits are not primary drivers of migration. David G40/Shutterstock

Research suggests that migration policies which make migrants' status temporary make them less likely to integrate. In particular, a study on Denmark found that making permanent residence harder to obtain for refugees reduced the chances of them being employed. People who believed they could not meet the new requirements became discouraged and disengaged from the labour market – the opposite of what the government wanted.

The UK's proposed changes risk producing a similar dynamic, trapping people into what has been described as an "extended limbo". Given these risks, the government should be careful in treating this approach as an end in itself when it comes to increased immigration.

Matilde Rosina

Assistant Professor in Global Challenges, Brunel University of London

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.64628/AB.qvfjrssrv>