Home Secretary unveils plan to cut net migration

The government will introduce a plan to deliver the biggest ever cut in net migration and curb abuse of the immigration system.

The Home Secretary has announced a plan to slash migration levels and curb abuse of the immigration system, delivering the biggest ever reduction in net migration. Together, this package will mean around 300,000 people who came to the UK last year would now not be able to come.

The package of measures will end the high numbers of dependants coming to the UK, increase the minimum salaries that overseas workers and British or settled people sponsoring family members must earn, and tackle exploitation across the immigration system.

The government will tighten the Health and Care Worker visa, which has seen a significant number of visas granted to care workers and their dependants, by preventing overseas care workers from bringing their dependants to the UK. In addition, care providers in England will now only be able to sponsor migrant workers if they are undertaking activities regulated by the Care Quality Commission.

In the year ending September 2023, 101,000 Health and Care Worker visas were issued to care workers and senior care workers, with an estimated 120,000 visas granted to associated dependants, the majority of whom we estimate don’t work, but still make use of public services.

From next spring, the government will increase the earning threshold for overseas workers by nearly 50% from its current position of £26,200 to £38,700, encouraging businesses to look to British talent first and invest in their workforce, helping us to deter employers from over-relying on migration, while bringing salaries in line with the average full-time salary for these types of jobs. The government will also increase the minimum income required for British citizens and those settled in the UK who want their family members to join them. Altogether this reinforces that all those who want to work and live here must be able to support themselves, are contributing to the economy, and are not burdening the state.

To crack down on cut-price labour from overseas, the government will end the 20% going-rate salary discount for shortage occupations and replace the Shortage Occupation List with a new Immigration Salary List, which will retain a general threshold discount. The Migration Advisory Committee will review the new list against the increased salary thresholds in order to reduce the number of occupations on the list.

The Migration Advisory Committee will be asked to review the Graduate visa route to ensure it works in the best interests of the UK and to ensure steps are being taken to prevent abuse.

This new package of measures builds on the tough action already taken to tackle the substantial rise in students bringing dependants to the UK, which will come into force in the new year. We expect this change will have a tangible impact on net migration, with around 153,000 visas granted to dependants of sponsored students in the year ending September 2023. This, along with the changes announced today, will further protect the integrity and quality of higher education in the UK.

The measures announced today are possible because the government is prioritising growing our domestic workforce through our Back to Work Plan – a package of employment-focused support that will help people stay healthy, get off benefits and move into work – as part of the Autumn Statement. The new Back to Work Plan builds on the ambitious £7 billion employment package from the Spring Budget, to help up to 1,100,000 people with long-term health conditions, disabilities or long-term unemployment to look for and stay in work.

Home Secretary James Cleverly said:

It is clear that net migration remains far too high. By leaving the European Union we gained control over who can come to the UK, but far more must be done to bring those numbers down so British workers are not undercut and our public services put under less strain.

My plan will deliver the biggest ever reduction in net migration and will mean around 300,000 people who came to the UK last year would not have been able to do so. I am taking decisive action to halt the drastic rise in our work visa routes and crack down on those who seek to take advantage of our hospitality.

In addition to measures to reduce migration, the government is increasing the annual Immigration Health Surcharge from £624 to £1,035 to make sure that migrants coming to the UK make a fair financial contribution so that public services, including the NHS, are not taken advantage of.

Workers and their dependants account for some of the highest proportion of visas being issued, with Skilled Worker and Health and Care Worker visas accounting for 63% of work grants, and the proportion of work-related visas being granted to dependants rising to 43% in the year ending September 2023.

The addition of carers in the UK’s immigration system was a temporary measure to fill labour shortages by responding to an urgent need in the adult social care sector following the coronavirus pandemic. Today’s measures will ensure we continue to protect our NHS and social care systems while addressing significant concerns that have emerged since the introduction of the visa about high levels of non-compliance and worker exploitation and abuse within the adult social care sector, particularly for overseas workers employed within care occupations.

Earlier this year, the government announced a package of measures to cut the number of student visas being issued. This included removing the right for international students to bring dependants unless they are on postgraduate research courses and removing the ability for international students to switch on to work routes before their studies are completed. This will come into force for courses starting in January 2024.