



Introduction

People seeking asylum in the UK are effectively prohibited from working. Instead, they are forced to rely on asylum support of just £7 a day while they wait for a decision on their asylum claim, or just £1.25 a day for those in barracks or hotels. In the midst of an ongoing cost-of-living crisis, this small sum is [inadequate to even cover essentials](#).

UK immigration rules dictate that people can only apply to work after they have been waiting for a decision on their asylum claim for over a year. But few people are able to work in practice because their employment is restricted to the narrow list of professions included on the Immigration Salary List, such as a ballet dancer or geophysicist. The Government's own [Migration Advisory Committee](#) recommends that 'if granted the right to work, asylum seekers should be able to work in any job'.

Over 76,000 people have been waiting more than six months for a decision on their asylum claim, according to the Government's latest [immigration statistics](#). 58% of the initial decisions made in the year ending June 2024 were granted refugee status or another form of protection.

Forcing people into inactivity is at odds with Government policy, which in most instances aims to move people away from welfare dependency and into work. At a time of severe labour shortages in the UK, while key sectors such as the NHS and agriculture have no choice but to recruit rapidly from abroad, it makes no sense to prohibit thousands of hard-working, often highly skilled people who are already in the UK from working. The policy increases the difficulty of integration for the majority of people who are eventually permitted to stay, creating what researchers call an "[economic scarring effect](#)", and is hugely costly to the public purse. The ban on working stands in the way of growth, with the independent Commission on the Integration of Refugees estimating that lifting the work ban would generate [£1.2 billion to the UK economy](#) within five years.

The Lift the Ban coalition is therefore calling for people seeking asylum and their adult dependents to be **granted full working rights after six months** of having lodged an asylum claim.

Lift the Ban arguments for reform

It would bring significant fiscal benefit and generate growth. The Lift the Ban coalition estimates this could save HM Treasury over £280 million per year. In addition, recent [research](#) by the National Institute for Economic and Social Research (NIESR) finds that lifting the ban after six months could save the Government a total of £4.4 billion per year, increase tax revenue by £880 million and add £1 billion to GDP.

It would help address labour shortages. Employment figures continue to show tightness in the labour market, [significantly impacting on economic growth](#). The latest [ONS data](#) shows that labour shortages remain higher than pre-pandemic levels, whilst according to the Institute of Directors, [45% of business leaders](#) report skills and labour shortages negatively impacting their organisations. [The British Chambers of Commerce have urged for reform](#) of the Shortage Occupation List (now Immigration Salary List) to allow sectors facing urgent demand for skills to get what they need. The Migration Advisory Committee has repeatedly criticised the application of this list to restrictions on people seeking asylum. Prohibiting thousands of people already in the UK who have the necessary skills to fill vacancies in many industries experiencing labour shortages makes no sense. [The Health Foundation](#) describes the social care workforce crisis as 'dire'. Meanwhile, research by the Lift the Ban coalition revealed that 1 in 7 people seeking asylum had experience of working in health or social care and a [2020 survey found 45%](#) of people waiting for a decision would have been classed as critical workers during the Covid-19 pandemic.

It would support integration. Access to employment improves economic and social integration by allowing people to improve their English, acquire new skills and contribute to their community. Crucially, it enables people to be self-sufficient and provides them with the human dignity of being able to provide for themselves and their families. Positive integration can alleviate the effects of prior trauma, and provide [benefits for all members of the community](#) as well as enhancing social cohesion. A [study](#) from Germany found that the longer people were prevented from working, the worse the subsequent employment trajectories of refugees.

It provides a route out of poverty. The cost-of-living crisis has illuminated the ongoing dangers and frustrations these restrictive rules impose. Food and energy prices have soared, yet the rate of asylum support allowance has not kept up. Between 2000 and 2023, the [real value of asylum support fell by 29%](#). Without the option to support themselves and their families through work, many people seeking asylum are forced to experience grinding poverty, destitution and homelessness, without any possibility of alleviating their circumstances.



The public and employers support the change. Evidence shows the Government is out of touch with the public on this issue. YouGov polling carried out in March 2022 found 81% of the population support the right to work being granted after someone has waited six months. This was consistent among different voting groups: 81% Conservatives, 87% Labour, 88% Lib Dem. Polling carried out in 2021 found 71% of the public agreed allowing people to work would positively support integration and [YouGov polling conducted by the IRC in December 2022](#) found that over two-thirds of businesses supported this policy change and the majority thought it would have a positive impact on the economy.

It prevents exploitation and forced labour. Without the opportunity to work, many people seeking asylum are forced into unsafe and exploitative practices, including forced labour. [The Migration Advisory Committee outlined in its 2023 annual report](#) that preventing some groups of migrants such as asylum seekers from obtaining safe and legal sources of income may push people into exploitative situations. This was echoed in a report by the [British Red Cross and UNHCR](#), which found that people living on asylum support for prolonged periods of time, who were struggling to pay for essentials and without the right to work, faced risks of exploitation.

It would bring the UK into line with policy in all other comparable countries. The restrictive approach that the UK takes on the right to work makes it an international outlier. In all comparable countries across Europe, people are given an opportunity to support themselves at an earlier stage and with fewer restrictions. In France, Spain and the USA, it is a six-month wait and in Germany it is a three-month wait. In Canada and Australia, people can apply to work immediately.

Significant cross-party support from across the House. The campaign has enjoyed strong support from politicians across the political spectrum, with a wide range of Parliamentary champions uniting across the House to call for reform. During its passage through the House of Lords, [the Nationality and Borders Bill was amended](#) three times to include a Conservative-led amendment, supported by cross-party peers, to reduce restrictions on working for people seeking asylum, with 66 Conservative MPs and Peers writing to the then-Prime Minister urging him to consider the change.

Busting the 'pull factor' myth

The previous Government maintained their line that relaxing restrictions on working for asylum seekers- in line with other countries- would attract people to claim asylum in the UK who otherwise might not have done so. However, all available evidence has extensively shown that permission to work is not a pull factor. [The Home Office's own leaked report](#) revealed that many people seeking asylum do not have a previous understanding of welfare policies or access to provisions before they come to a country and migrants have little knowledge of the current labour market conditions in destination countries. [A review of 29 academic papers](#) found that there was no correlation between the right to work and where people seeking asylum chose to seek protection.

In December 2021 the Government's own independent advisory body, the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC), [published its annual report](#) that included a recommendation that the Government review its policy on the right to work. It also suggested that if the Home Office held robust evidence regarding the pull factor of granting the right to work, then it should publish it as available research. [The 2022 annual MAC report again referenced the same recommendation it made a year before.](#)

In reality, most people seeking asylum do not have a choice about the country to which they flee, and many of those that have come to the UK have done so because of cultural, family or community connections. This again was confirmed in the [Home Office report](#), which highlighted that 'social networks, shared languages and diaspora communities can motivate asylum seekers to reach certain destination countries'.

About the Lift the Ban Coalition

The Lift the Ban campaign is backed by a diverse coalition of more than 300 members (including the Adam Smith Institute, the TUC, Unison, Ben & Jerry's and the Church of England). Website: www.lifttheban.co.uk.

If you have any questions or would like any further information then please contact Mary Brandon (mary@asylummatters.org) or Nathan Phillips (nathan@asylummatters.org) at [Asylum Matters](#).