BRIEFING

Public attitudes to labour migrants in the pandemic: dynamics during 2021

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This is the fourth briefing of a study that investigated public attitudes to labour migrants in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on tracking preferences over time. The data presented here were collected during January and June–July 2021.

Key Points

While attitudes towards migrants vary substantially depending on migrants' characteristics, growing evidence suggests that public opinion about immigration may be more stable in the face of shocks than previously thought.

Although public attitudes continued to be more positive towards migrants in jobs considered essential during the pandemic by the UK Government, this positivity lessened between January and June–July 2021 with respect to admitting migrants working in essential occupations.

Attitudes towards migrants working in higher-skilled occupations remained more positive compared to lower-skilled occupations, but the gap between these groups narrowed.

Among the 10 nationalities considered in the study, public attitudes continued to be least positive towards migrants from China and most positive towards Australian migrants, although migrants' occupational essentialness and skill levels generally mattered more.

Public preferences remained highest towards granting primary healthcare access to migrants (as opposed to Universal Credit or Housing Credit) regardless of how long they had been in the country. However, public willingness decreased between January and June–July 2021 when considering migrants who had lived in the country for at least 5 years, especially for those working in essential occupations.

Understanding the evidence

The overall objective of the project is to understand (1) what determines public attitudes towards migrant labour and migration policies during the COVID-19 pandemic, (2) whether these attitudes are dependent on migrants' occupation, which vary in terms of occupational skill levels and essentialness to the COVID-19 response, (3) whether attitudes vary across UK regions, and (4) the longevity of any observed attitudinal shifts, particularly in relation to the government's efforts at developing and implementing policies for economic recovery.

The data presented in this briefing comes from two waves of a survey fielded by YouGov UK in January and June–July 2021 to a nationally representative sample from an online panel (YouGov 2021). Here, we focus on reporting on the dynamics of aggregate-level attitude change. The January wave comprised 4,954 adults living in the UK, while the June–July wave comprised 3,261 respondents from the January wave who were successfully recontacted (representing a recontact rate of about 66%). Longitudinal studies like this one enable researchers to measure the extent to which attitudes and preferences change or remain stable during this key period—something that single surveys (as 'snapshots' in time) cannot reveal.

The part of the survey on which this briefing is based presented respondents with pairs of hypothetical migrants' profiles. The only information that was given about these profiles was their nationality and occupation:

Here are the profiles of two people who could apply to enter the UK.

	Person 1	Person 2
Nationality		
Occupation		

Respondents were asked to rate their preference for admitting each person to the UK, their perception of how much each person contributes to the UK economy, and their support for each person's right to access the following three benefits upon arrival and after five years of residence in the UK: Universal Credit (payment to help with living costs), Housing Assistance (financial help for housing from the local council) and National Health Service Primary Care (first point of contact for healthcare, usually a general practitioner).

Each respondent evaluated three pairs of profiles in total. We considered 12 occupations and 10 nationalities, which were randomly assigned to the profiles presented to respondents. The nationalities reflect some of the top countries of origin of migrants in the UK, key population groups in the public debate and are geographically and ethnically diverse (Australia, China, Germany, India, Italy, Jamaica, Nigeria, Pakistan, Poland, and Romania). The occupations have a substantial share of migrant workers and vary with regard to skill level—along the lines of low and medium-low skilled vs high and medium-high skilled, based on ONS (2010) categorisation—and essentialness, as indicated by their inclusion or exclusion from the UK government's list of essential workers during the pandemic (Office for National Statistics 2020).

Methodological note about conjoint analysis
Conjoint analysis is a survey experimental technique that estimates respondents' preferences given their overall evaluations of alternative profiles that vary across multiple attributes. Usually, researchers are interested in estimating how different values of an attribute – for example, nationality or occupation – influence the probability of choosing a given profile or rating a profile with a specific score. One advantage of conjoint survey designs is that respondents do not have to see all possible unique profiles (in this study, the total number of unique nationality-occupation combinations is 120). Another advantage is that it can reduce social desirability bias on sensitive topics like migration (see Creighton and Jamal 2022) by allowing respondents to justify their responses along any of the criteria. Therefore, conjoint experiments are efficient at revealing respondents' preferences that may have multiple dimensions. For more information about conjoint analysis, see Hainmueller et al. (2014).

While attitudes towards migrants vary substantially depending on migrants' characteristics, growing evidence suggests that public opinion about immigration may be more stable in the face of shocks than previously thought.

A great deal of research shows how public opinion about immigrants depends on which types of migrants are involved (see the Migration Observatory briefing, Who Counts as a Migrant? Definitions and their Consequences). Moreover, external events, migratory flows, media coverage, and political settings also likely matter for attitude formation.

However, evidence across many immigrant-receiving countries also suggests that public opinion may be more stable in the longer-run: despite short-term shifts in public concern about immigration—perhaps in response to crises or political developments—these tend to wear off as time goes on (Claassen and McLaren 2021). Therefore, rather than expecting immigration attitudes to dramatically and permanently change as a result of significant shocks, it is more likely that attitudes remain relatively stable despite these events (Kustov, Laaker, and Reller 2021). The results shown in this briefing, taken at two different time points in the UK's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, lend support towards this conclusion.

Although public attitudes continued to be more positive towards migrants in jobs considered essential during the pandemic by the UK Government, this positivity lessened between January and June-July 2021 with respect to admitting migrants working in essential occupations.

In January 2021, the UK was entering a third lockdown. At this time, the UK public expressed more favourable attitudes towards migrants working in jobs considered essential by the government (Office for National Statistics 2020). These kinds of migrants were more likely to be preferred for admission into the UK, and were perceived to have a more positive impact on the UK economy. 'Essential' occupations in our study included doctors, care workers, secondary school teachers, supermarket lorry drivers, pharmaceutical lab technicians, and meatpackers.
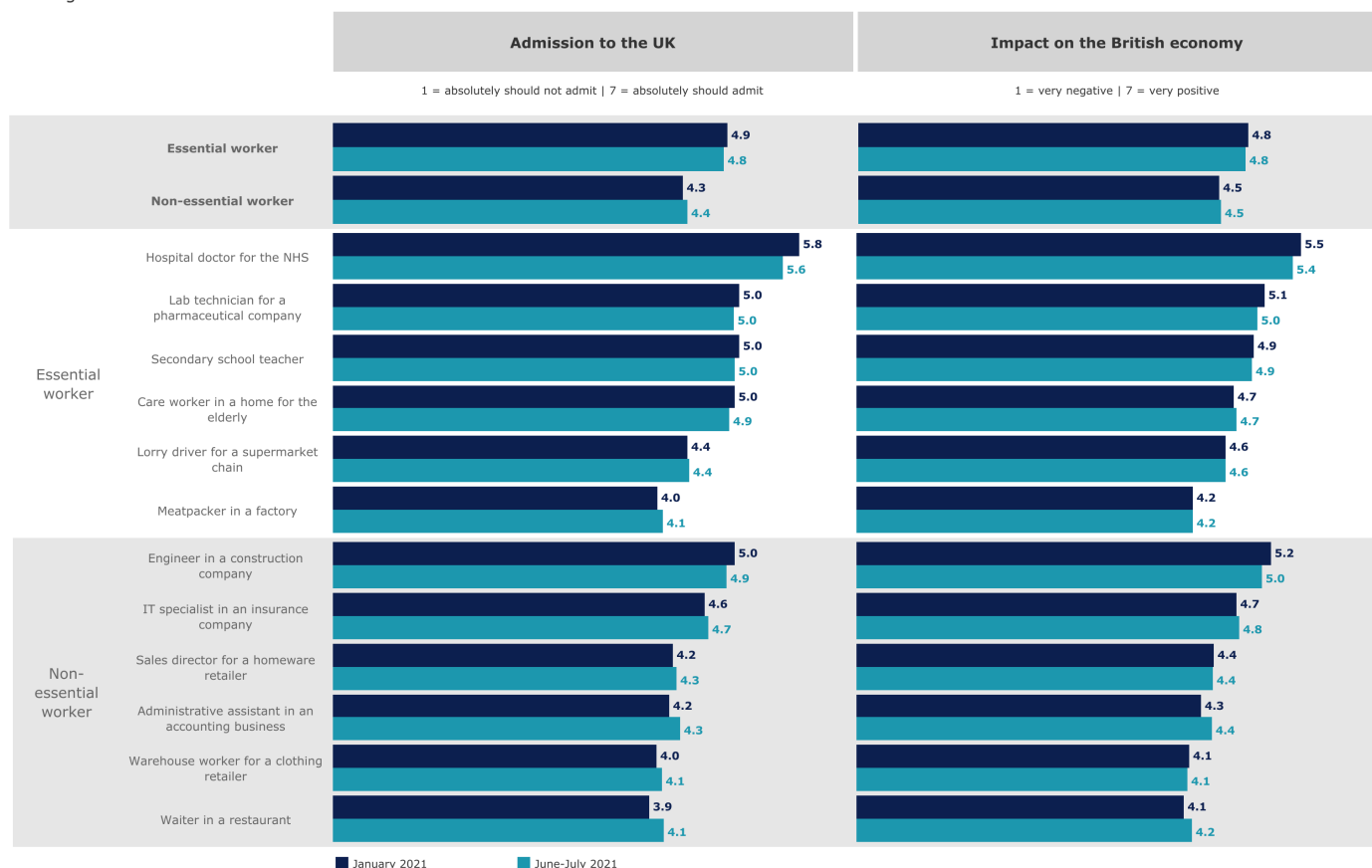
This pattern continued into June-July 2021 (Figure 1), when restrictions had been largely lifted (though some variations still existed in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland). At this point in time, respondents still preferred admitting workers in essential occupations over non-essential occupations by 0.44 on a 7-point scale. However, this preference for essential workers was lower than in January, when respondents preferred admitting essential workers by 0.56 on a 7-point scale. (Throughout this briefing, any highlighted differences are statistically significant). Respondents evaluated the economic impact of essential workers more favourably than non-essential workers, a view that did not change significantly between January and June-July 2021.

Attitudes towards the 12 specific occupations in the study largely remained similar both in scale and rank order (Figure 1). Doctors were most preferred, while warehouse workers in non-essential sectors were least preferred. Despite recent concerns about truck drivers and supply chains, this was apparently not salient for public attitudes at the time of the survey fieldwork in June-July, as responses towards this occupation did not significantly change in either direction from January. Although respondents did express significantly higher admission preferences for waiters in restaurants—possibly explained by well-publicised shortages in the hospitality sector as the industry began re-opening—this did not reflect a substantial shift.

Figure 1

Public attitudes towards migrants in essential and non-essential occupations during the pandemic, January & June-July 2021
Averages based on a 1-7 scale

	Admission to the UK	Impact on the British economy
	1 = absolutely should not admit | 7 = absolutely should admit	1 = very negative | 7 = very positive
Essential worker	4.9 / 4.8	4.8 / 4.8
Non-essential worker	4.3 / 4.4	4.5 / 4.5

Essential worker

	January 2021 / June-July 2021	January 2021 / June-July 2021
Hospital doctor for the NHS	5.8 / 5.6	5.5 / 5.4
Lab technician for a pharmaceutical company	5.0 / 5.0	5.1 / 5.0
Secondary school teacher	5.0 / 5.0	4.9 / 4.9
Care worker in a home for the elderly	5.0 / 4.9	4.7 / 4.7
Lorry driver for a supermarket chain	4.4 / 4.4	4.6 / 4.6
Meatpacker in a factory	4.0 / 4.1	4.2 / 4.2

Non-essential worker

Engineer in a construction company	5.0 / 4.9	5.2 / 5.0
IT specialist in an insurance company	4.6 / 4.7	4.7 / 4.8
Sales director for a homeware retailer	4.2 / 4.3	4.4 / 4.4
Administrative assistant in an accounting business	4.2 / 4.3	4.3 / 4.4
Warehouse worker for a clothing retailer	4.0 / 4.1	4.1 / 4.1
Waiter in a restaurant	3.9 / 4.1	4.1 / 4.2

■ January 2021   ■ June-July 2021

Source: *Tracking Public Attitudes and Preferences for Post-COVID-19 Labour Migration Policies. January 2021: N=4,954. June-July 2021: N=3,261.*
Note: essential workers identified following ONS interpretation of UK Government Guidelines

Attitudes towards migrants working in higher-skilled occupations remained more positive compared to lower-skilled occupations, but the gap between these groups narrowed.

Throughout the first half of 2021, the UK public continued to express more willingness to admit migrants working in high or medium-high skilled jobs, and viewed these people as having a more positive impact on the UK economy, compared to those working in low or medium-low skilled jobs (Figure 2). However, similar to migrants working in essential jobs, this gap narrowed between January and June-July: on the likelihood of admission, from 0.69 to 0.57 on a 7-point scale, and from 0.66 to 0.55 on the same scale when considering economic perceptions.

Figure 2

Public attitudes towards migrants in occupations of different skill level, January & June-July 2021
Averages based on a 1-7 scale
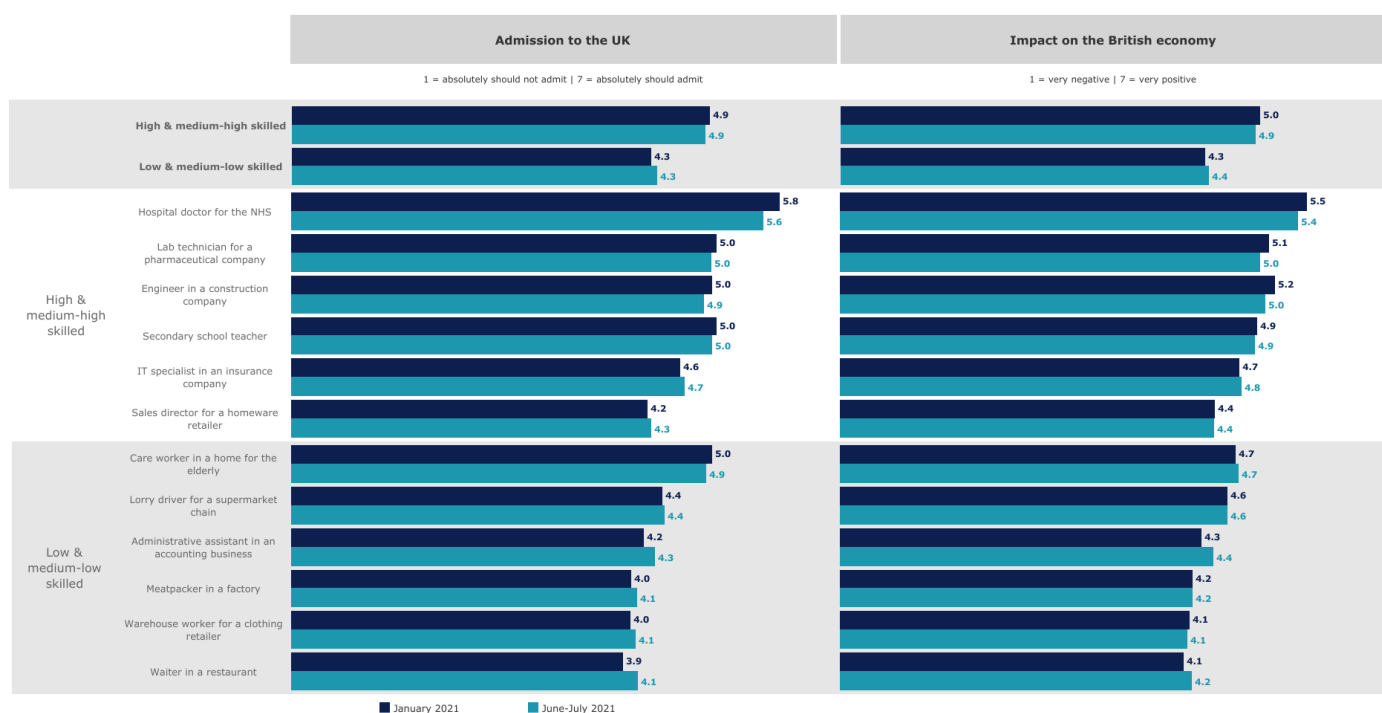
Source: *Tracking Public Attitudes and Preferences for Post-COVID-19 Labour Migration Policies. January 2021: N=4,954. June-July 2021: N=3,261.*
Note: job skills classification are based on the four-category classification developed by the ONS in 2010. In this context, job skills mainly indicate the educational credentials that are required to perform a job and do not consider other types of skills that are valued in the labour market.
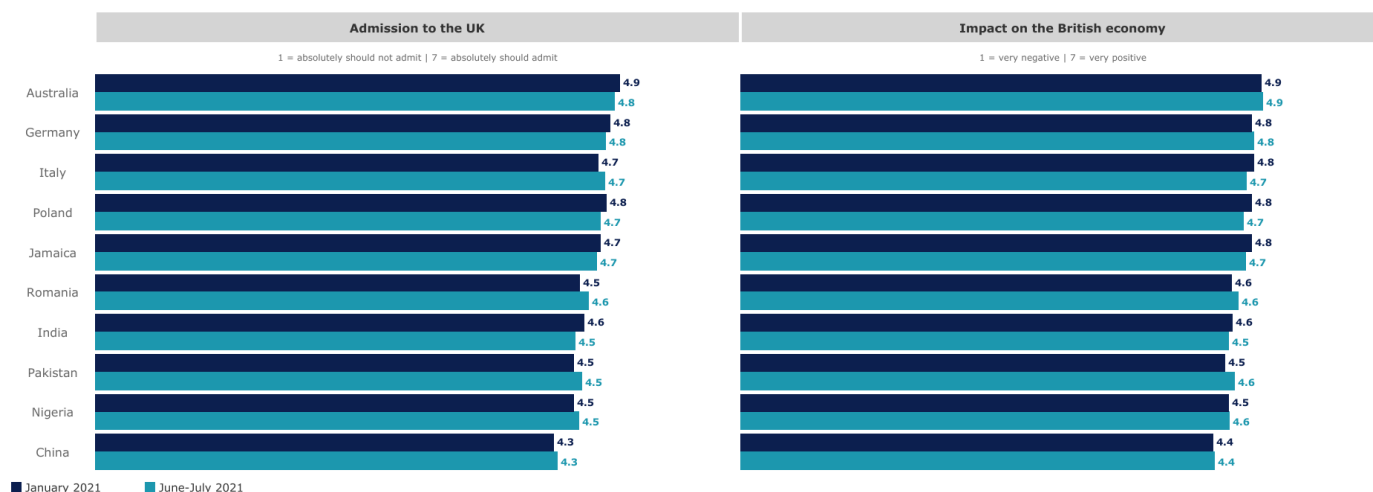
Among the 10 nationalities considered in the study, public attitudes continued to be least positive towards migrants from China and most positive towards Australian migrants, although migrants' occupational essentialness and skill levels generally mattered more.

In January 2021, the UK public viewed migrants from China most negatively: they were least likely to be preferred for admission and were viewed as having the least positive impact on the UK economy compared to other nationalities. This pattern was consistent through to June–July (Figure 3). By contrast, migrants from Australia, Germany, and Italy remained more positively viewed. However, looking at the magnitude of these differences, essentialness and occupational skill appear to matter more than national origins when it comes to the UK public's willingness to admit migrants and its perceptions of migrants' economic impacts.

Figure 3

Public attitudes towards migrants of different nationalities, January & June-July 2021
Averages based on a 1-7 scale

	Admission to the UK 1 = absolutely should not admit | 7 = absolutely should admit	Impact on the British economy 1 = very negative | 7 = very positive
Australia	4.9 / 4.8	4.9 / 4.9
Germany	4.8 / 4.8	4.8 / 4.8
Italy	4.7 / 4.7	4.8 / 4.7
Poland	4.8 / 4.7	4.8 / 4.7
Jamaica	4.7 / 4.7	4.8 / 4.7
Romania	4.5 / 4.6	4.6 / 4.6
India	4.6 / 4.5	4.6 / 4.5
Pakistan	4.5 / 4.5	4.5 / 4.6
Nigeria	4.5 / 4.5	4.5 / 4.6
China	4.3 / 4.3	4.4 / 4.4

■ January 2021 ■ June-July 2021

Source: *Tracking Public Attitudes and Preferences for Post-COVID-19 Labour Migration Policies. January 2021: N=4,954. June-July 2021: N=3,261.*
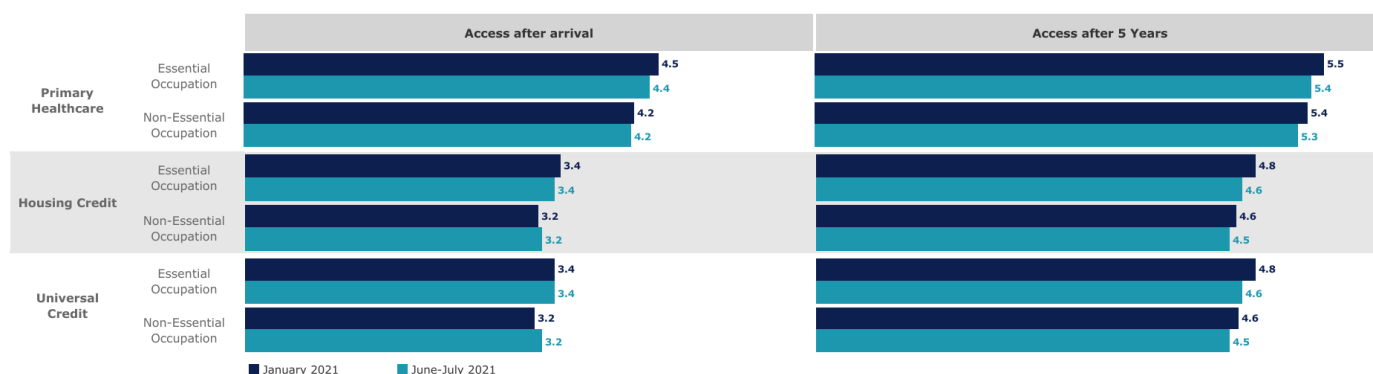
Public preferences remained highest towards granting primary healthcare access to migrants (as opposed to Universal Credit or Housing Credit) regardless of how long they had been in the country. However, public willingness decreased between January and June-July 2021 when considering migrants who had lived in the country for at least 5 years, especially for those working in essential occupations.

In January 2021, the UK public was more willing to extend access to primary healthcare (e.g., NHS general practitioners) to migrants who had just arrived compared to other welfare benefits such as Universal Credit or Housing Assistance—and particularly for migrants working in essential occupations compared to non-essential occupations. This remained broadly stable as of June–July (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Public support for migrants' access to welfare programmes, by years of residency: essential vs. non-essential occupations, January & June-July 2021
Average on a 1-7 scale (1=absolutely should not access | 7=absolutely should access)

		Access after arrival	Access after 5 Years
Primary Healthcare	Essential Occupation	4.5 / 4.4	5.5 / 5.4
	Non-Essential Occupation	4.2 / 4.2	5.4 / 5.3
Housing Credit	Essential Occupation	3.4 / 3.4	4.8 / 4.6
	Non-Essential Occupation	3.2 / 3.2	4.6 / 4.5
Universal Credit	Essential Occupation	3.4 / 3.4	4.8 / 4.6
	Non-Essential Occupation	3.2 / 3.2	4.6 / 4.5

■ January 2021 ■ June-July 2021

Source: *Tracking Public Attitudes and Preferences for Post-COVID-19 Labour Migration Policies. January 2021: N=4,954. June-July 2021: N=3,261.*
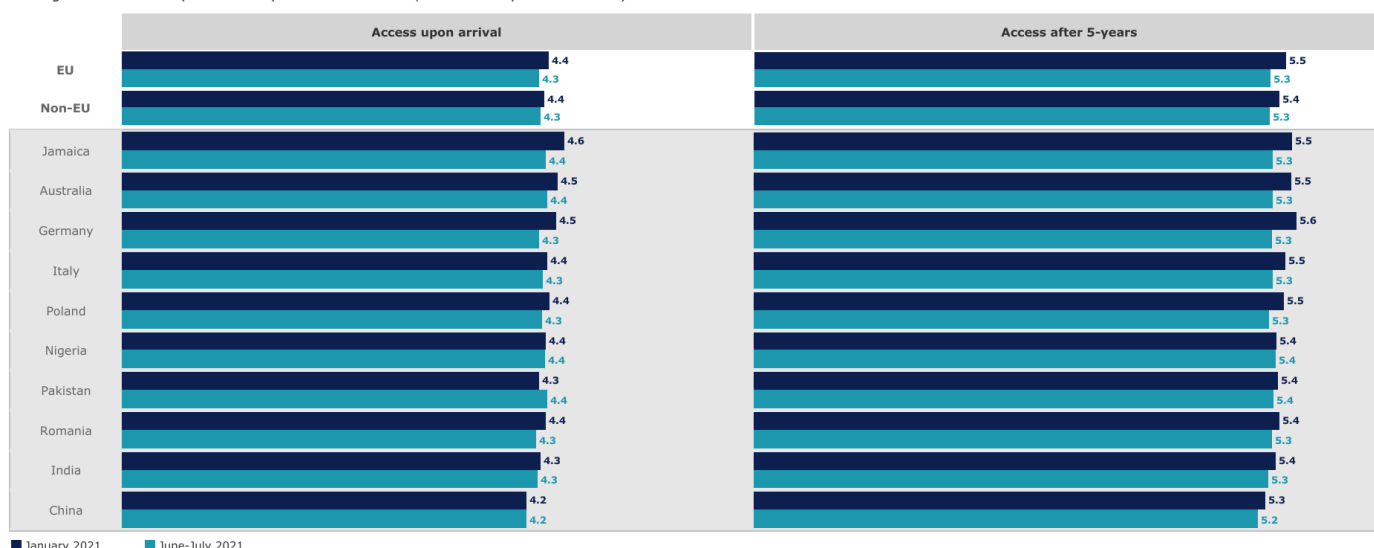
Public support for migrants accessing these welfare programmes continued to be higher when considering migrants who have lived in the UK for longer periods. However, between January and June–July, support weakened—particularly for migrants working in essential occupations and for migrants from Germany, Jamaica, and Australia (Figures 5, 6, and 7). In other words, willingness for giving these migrants access to welfare programmes after they have spent five years in the UK decreased between January and June–July 2021.

Figure 5

Public support for migrants' access to NHS primary care, by nationality and years of residency, January & June-July 2021
Average on a 1-7 scale (1=absolutely should not access | 7=absolutely should access)

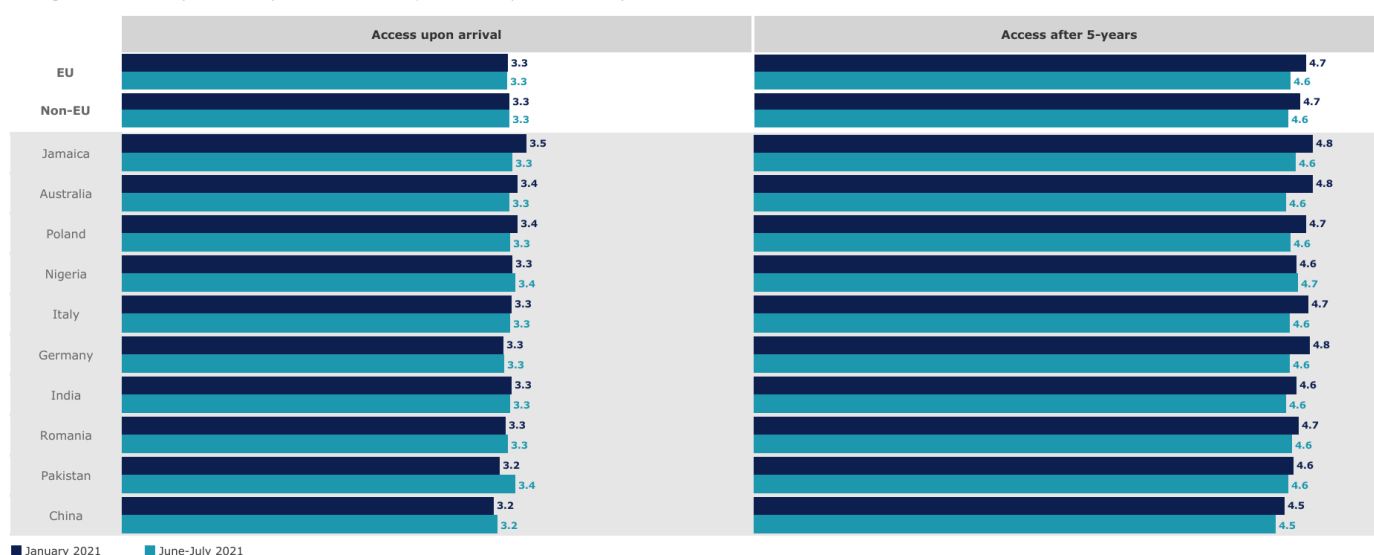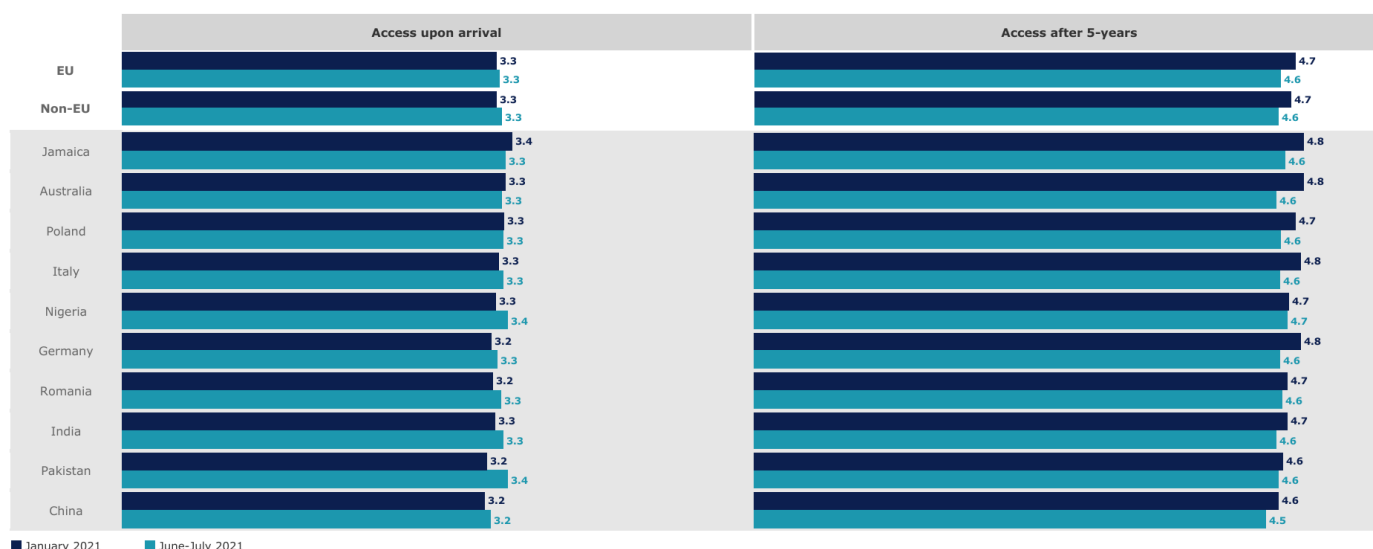|	Access upon arrival	Access after 5-years
EU	4.4 / 4.3	5.5 / 5.3
Non-EU	4.4 / 4.3	5.4 / 5.3
Jamaica	4.6 / 4.4	5.5 / 5.3
Australia	4.5 / 4.4	5.5 / 5.3
Germany	4.5 / 4.3	5.6 / 5.3
Italy	4.4 / 4.3	5.5 / 5.3
Poland	4.4 / 4.3	5.5 / 5.3
Nigeria	4.4 / 4.4	5.4 / 5.4
Pakistan	4.3 / 4.4	5.4 / 5.4
Romania	4.4 / 4.3	5.4 / 5.3
India	4.3 / 4.3	5.4 / 5.3
China	4.2 / 4.2	5.3 / 5.2

■ January 2021 ■ June-July 2021

Source: *Tracking Public Attitudes and Preferences for Post-COVID-19 Labour Migration Policies. January 2021: N=4,954. June-July 2021: N=3,261.*

Figure 6

Public support for migrants' access to housing assistance, by nationality and years of residency, January & June-July 2021
Average on a 1-7 scale (1=absolutely should not access | 7=absolutely should access)

	Access upon arrival	Access after 5-years
EU	3.3 / 3.3	4.7 / 4.6
Non-EU	3.3 / 3.3	4.7 / 4.6
Jamaica	3.5 / 3.3	4.8 / 4.6
Australia	3.4 / 3.3	4.8 / 4.6
Poland	3.4 / 3.3	4.7 / 4.6
Nigeria	3.3 / 3.4	4.6 / 4.7
Italy	3.3 / 3.3	4.7 / 4.6
Germany	3.3 / 3.3	4.8 / 4.6
India	3.3 / 3.3	4.6 / 4.6
Romania	3.3 / 3.3	4.7 / 4.6
Pakistan	3.2 / 3.4	4.6 / 4.6
China	3.2 / 3.2	4.5 / 4.5

■ January 2021 ■ June-July 2021

Source: *Tracking Public Attitudes and Preferences for Post-COVID-19 Labour Migration Policies. January 2021: N=4,954. June-July 2021: N=3,261.*

Figure 7

Public support for migrants' access to universal credit, by nationality and years of residency, January & June-July 2021
Average on a 1-7 scale (1=absolutely should not access | 7=absolutely should access)

	Access upon arrival		Access after 5-years	
EU	3.3 / 3.3		4.7 / 4.6	
Non-EU	3.3 / 3.3		4.7 / 4.6	
Jamaica	3.4 / 3.3		4.8 / 4.6	
Australia	3.3 / 3.3		4.8 / 4.6	
Poland	3.3 / 3.3		4.7 / 4.6	
Italy	3.3 / 3.3		4.8 / 4.6	
Nigeria	3.3 / 3.4		4.7 / 4.7	
Germany	3.2 / 3.3		4.8 / 4.6	
Romania	3.2 / 3.3		4.7 / 4.6	
India	3.3 / 3.3		4.7 / 4.6	
Pakistan	3.2 / 3.4		4.6 / 4.6	
China	3.2 / 3.2		4.6 / 4.5	

■ January 2021 ■ June-July 2021

Source: *Tracking Public Attitudes and Preferences for Post-COVID-19 Labour Migration Policies. January 2021: N=4,954. June-July 2021: N=3,261.*

Moreover, with respect to primary NHS healthcare, the UK public became less willing to grant access to longer-term migrants from EU countries over the course of the first half of 2021, although preferences did not change for newly-arrived EU migrants (Figure 5). Yet it is also important to note that preferences for extending all three types of welfare remained similar for migrants from both EU and non-EU countries.

Acknowledgements

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The Migration Observatory

Based at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford, the Migration Observatory provides independent, authoritative, evidence-based analysis of data on migration and migrants in the UK, to inform media, public and policy debates, and to generate high quality research on international migration and public policy issues. The Observatory's analysis involves experts from a wide range of disciplines and departments at the University of Oxford.

COMPAS

The Migration Observatory is based at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford. The mission of COMPAS is to conduct high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform policy-making and public debate, and engage users of research within the field of migration.
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