

UK and France Advance Migrant Return Pilot in Effort to Deter Channel Crossings

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A new migrant return agreement between the United Kingdom and France is set to begin within weeks, with the UK planning to return a limited number of small boat arrivals under a reciprocal pilot scheme. Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer, during a state visit to France, announced the “one in, one out” initiative, which will see the UK return illegal arrivals

while accepting an equal number of vetted asylum seekers directly from France.

The pilot, though lacking clarity on full operational details, is expected to initially focus on single adult migrants. While some reports have suggested up to 50 individuals per week may be sent back to France, Sir Keir did not confirm any figures. The government stated that implementation will be subject to legal review and coordination with the European Commission and European Union (EU) member states.

Sir Keir claimed the policy would “break the model” of criminal people-smuggling networks and send a message that Channel crossings are futile. Speaking alongside French President Emmanuel Macron, he described illegal migration as “a global crisis, an EU crisis, and a crisis for our two nations”.

More than 170,000 people have crossed the Channel to the UK in small boats since 2018, with nearly 20,000 arrivals in the first half of 2025 alone, setting a new record. Critics have long questioned the UK’s lack of effective deterrents, especially following Brexit, which removed Britain from the EU’s Dublin Regulation that allowed for the transfer of migrants between member states.

President Macron, while endorsing the pilot scheme’s deterrent value, suggested that Brexit had made UK border enforcement more difficult. In a pointed remark, he argued that the British public had been “sold a lie” that migration would be easier to control outside the EU, an assertion that reflects a broader political divergence.

The plan also includes an online platform for individuals in France to register interest in UK asylum, with preference given to those from high-risk smuggling regions or with UK family ties. The government says this will promote safer and controlled routes while closing opportunities exploited by traffickers.

Alongside the returns policy, the UK has pledged tougher enforcement against illegal working, particularly in industries such as gig economy delivery services. Starmer's government insists these roles will no longer be available to those entering unlawfully.

Whether this pilot delivers genuine results or becomes entangled in European bureaucracy remains to be seen, but public patience is wearing thin.