

UK to Begin Migrant Returns to France Under New Bilateral Deal

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The United Kingdom is set to start implementing a new migrant returns agreement with France within days, as part of a pilot scheme aimed at reducing illegal Channel crossings and tackling people-smuggling operations.

The agreement, ratified in early August by UK Home Secretary Yvette Cooper and her French counterpart, enables the return of migrants who arrive in the UK via small boats. In exchange, Britain will take in an equal number of asylum seekers from France with legitimate family ties in the UK. The pilot is scheduled to run until June 2026, with the possibility of expansion depending on its results.

Under the arrangement, France will accept returns of individuals who entered the UK irregularly, while the UK will resettle a matching number of vetted asylum seekers through a legal route. Returns are expected to begin at a rate of approximately 50 individuals per week. All those returned must meet the UK's inadmissibility criteria, while those accepted must pass biometric and security checks.

This scheme comes as the number of small boat crossings continues to rise sharply. Over 25,000 individuals have crossed the Channel so far in 2025, a significant increase from the previous year. The Home Office states that the initiative is intended to break the business model of criminal smuggling gangs operating in the Channel.

Officials stress that the pilot, although initially limited in scale, is designed to be scalable. If successful, it could lay the groundwork for broader bilateral cooperation on migration and serve as a deterrent to irregular entry.

However, the plan is not without challenges. Legal experts have raised concerns that returnees may use existing human rights protections to resist removal, potentially delaying the process for months or even years. France also retains discretion to refuse specific cases, including

unaccompanied minors or individuals flagged for health or security reasons.

Despite these issues, the government insists the agreement represents a new chapter in cross-Channel migration management. It forms part of wider efforts to assert control over Britain's borders, including enforcement measures against illegal employment and organised smuggling activity.

The European Commission has backed the pilot, viewing it as a step toward greater coordination on asylum policy post-Brexit. British authorities hope the scheme will demonstrate the effectiveness of controlled legal routes while discouraging unlawful migration.