

UK-France Migration Talks as Macron Visit Raises Pressure on Labour Over Small Boats Crisis

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As French President Emmanuel Macron visits the UK, talks are underway to forge a new agreement aimed at curbing illegal small boat crossings across the Channel. While Downing Street claims progress, concerns remain over the Labour government's ability to deliver meaningful deterrents amid rising numbers and European resistance.

French President Emmanuel Macron has pledged that the United Kingdom and France “will deliver” on stopping small boat crossings, ahead of formal talks with Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer this week. The high-profile state visit, the first by a French president since 2008, is being used by Downing Street to push for a deal focused on border enforcement and migration deterrence.

Key among the proposals being discussed is a “one in, one out” arrangement. Under the plan, Britain would be able to return illegal Channel migrants to France in exchange for accepting asylum seekers who have existing family connections in the UK. Officials hope that such an agreement would act as a deterrent by making it clear that crossing the Channel illegally does not guarantee entry into Britain.

Speaking before both Houses of Parliament, President Macron acknowledged the growing pressure on both countries, stating that France and the UK share a responsibility to tackle irregular migration “with humanity, solidarity and fairness”. He also called for greater support from the European Union (EU), warning that a truly effective solution requires action at the European level.

However, there is scepticism over whether the Labour government can secure such a deal, particularly amid ongoing opposition from a bloc of five Mediterranean EU countries. These nations have raised objections, fearing they may be required to take in migrants rejected by the UK. Talks with the European Commission (EC) are ongoing to resolve these disputes.

Sir Keir Starmer is also pressing France to revise its current enforcement rules to allow French police to intercept small boats in shallow water,

rather than only on land. A Downing Street spokesperson stated on Tuesday that new enforcement powers are expected to be “operationalised soon”, and described months of negotiations with France as “bearing fruit”.

In a recent development that may signal a shift in French tactics, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) reporters observed French police puncturing a small boat after it had launched, a method not previously deployed in such situations. Government sources say this reflects a new agreement with the French to intervene earlier in crossings.

Critics argue that Labour has been slow to act, despite record-breaking numbers of arrivals this year. Between January and June 2025, nearly 20,000 people made the crossing—a 48% increase compared to the same period in 2024. Despite repeated pledges to bring numbers down, the trend shows no sign of reversing.

Since 2018, the UK has committed more than £700 million to France for coastal patrols and surveillance, with nearly £500 million pledged under a 2023 agreement secured by the previous Conservative government. Asked whether the UK should demand accountability for results, Downing Street defended the Labour government’s approach but offered no concrete plan for enforcement if targets continue to be missed.

The Liberal Democrats (Lib Dems) have backed the principle of cross-border cooperation but called for a more ambitious UK role in Europol, the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation. Party spokesperson Lisa Smart argued that the UK should negotiate for stronger intelligence-sharing powers to help target smuggling gangs.

Labour, for its part, has introduced legislation to create new criminal offences related to people-smuggling and to give authorities broader powers, including travel bans and digital restrictions, under counter-terror frameworks. However, questions remain over whether legal reforms alone will halt the sharp rise in crossings.

While Macron's visit brings symbolic unity, it also puts pressure squarely on the Labour government to show concrete results. After years of investment and escalating numbers, the British public is right to expect more than carefully worded statements and conditional promises.