IMIX GUIDE FOR JOURNALISTS

Reporting migration numbers

A two-page guide ahead of the ONS net migration release, Thursday 26 November 2026

Net migration has fallen by more than three-quarters from its peak, and almost two-thirds of the public think it is rising. This guide sets out what the figures measure, the mistakes that recur in migration media coverage, and the stories the headline number hides.

What your audience believes right now

- **63%** think net migration rose in the year to June 2025. It fell 66%, from 649,000 to 219,000. Only 4% said it fell significantly.
- **55%** picture someone seeking asylum when they hear "immigrant". Asylum and humanitarian routes were 20% of arrivals.
- **67%** say immigration is a big problem in Britain. **31%** say so of their own area.

Source: Policy Institute at King's College London with YouGov, 1,827 UK adults, 23 to 27 March 2026

Six things to get right

1. Net is a balance, not a headcount. Net migration is arrivals minus departures. In 2025, 813,000 people arrived and 642,000 left, giving 171,000. Report all three numbers. A fall can come from fewer arrivals, more departures, or both.

2. Say what period the figure covers. Thursday's release is expected to cover the year to June 2026. Compare it with the year to June 2025, not with calendar-year figures.

3. The figures are provisional. ONS revises them, sometimes heavily. Net migration for 2024 was first published as 431,000 and later revised to 345,000. Say "estimated" and avoid treating small changes as real.

4. Say who is in the number. In the year to June 2025, students and their dependents were 43% of arrivals, workers and their dependents 27%, asylum and humanitarian routes 20%, and family 9%. People arriving by small boat who claim asylum are part of the long-term figures, not separate from them.

5. Show the trend. One figure means little alone. Give the peak (more than 900,000 in 2023), the last comparable figure and the forecast. The OBR projects 120,000 for 2026 and expects a rise again from 2028.

6. "Record low" needs a qualifier. Net migration was lower in the pandemic year of 2020. Check the ONS wording before using "lowest in 30 years" or "lowest since 1997".

Three framing habits to question

The habit	What it does, and an alternative
The scorecard. "A boost for the Prime Minister."	Turns a change affecting employers, universities and services into a party political result. Ask what has changed for the country, and for your patch.
The pivot. A sentence on the fall, then straight to small boats.	Tells audiences the real number is a different one. Report each on its own terms, and give the share: asylum and humanitarian routes are one in five arrivals.

The habit	What it does, and an alternative
"Not low enough." Reporting the fall only against a target.	Leaves the impression that the problem is growing. Ask anyone calling for a lower number what it would cost and who would fill the roles.

Questions worth asking on Thursday

- How much of the fall is fewer people arriving, and how much is more people leaving? Who is leaving?
- What does the fall mean for public finances? The OBR says lower net migration slightly reduces potential output. One estimate puts the cost of a 300,000 fall at about £20 billion a year.
- Ministers say there is "further to go". Further to what figure, and on what evidence?

Make it a story: behind every statistic is a person

A net migration figure is hundreds of thousands of individual decisions: to study, to take a job, to join family, to seek safety, to leave. Audiences skim past the number and remember the person. Lead with one, and use the figures as context.

- **Open with a person, not a percentage.** The student whose fees keep a course running. The care worker whose visa route has closed to new recruits. The family waiting to be reunited. The person who has decided to leave.
- **Find the local angle.** Ask your care providers, university and employers what the fall means for them. People are far less concerned about migration where they live than nationally, so test that in your patch.
- **Put a face to each group in the data.** Students are 43% of arrivals, workers 27%, asylum and humanitarian routes 20%. Majorities feel positive about migrants working as doctors (72%), nurses (71%) and care workers (63%). Speak to them.
- **Follow the consequences.** Numbers fell and recorded hate crime rose: 146,825 offences in the year to March 2026, up 7%. Ask your police force for local figures.
- **Let people speak for themselves.** Agree in advance how someone will be named, pictured and described.

Language and accuracy

- Avoid water and disaster metaphors: "flood", "wave", "surge", "influx".
- Do not use "migrant", "asylum seeker" and "refugee" interchangeably. They are different legal positions.
- When correcting a false claim, lead with the fact. Repeating the myth in a headline spreads it.

IMIX can find you the person behind the number

IMIX links journalists with storytellers who have lived experience of the immigration system, and with charities working in communities across the UK. Tell us your story and deadline. Contact: media@imix.org.uk.