



# From Pilot to Pathway: Designing the UK's Displaced Talent Visa

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In 2025, the [United Kingdom announced](#) that it would create a new capped visa to help refugees and displaced populations access economic opportunities in the UK. This is an excellent step forward, and we congratulate the Home Office on its ambition. This will be the world's first dedicated visa for displaced talent (building on pilot programmes in the UK, Canada, and Australia), demonstrating an innovative approach to the legal mobility of skilled refugees.

Attention must now turn to the visa's design. Most importantly, how can the visa reach meaningful scale while also providing adequate protection to vulnerable beneficiaries? There are tensions between different options, as we discuss here. We also provide a new [interactive costing tool](#), allowing users to see how combinations of different policy choices will affect financial outcomes for stakeholders—and the likely scalability of the new pathway.

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## Displaced Talent Mobility to the UK so far

From 2021 to 2024, the UK ran two pilots: the Displaced Talent Mobility Pilot (DTMP) and the Displaced Healthcare Talent Pilot. These pilots, implemented by Talent Beyond Boundaries (TBB), led to nearly 576 individuals moving to the UK [as of May 2025](#). Nearly 300 of these people moved on labour ([Skilled Worker](#)) visas. Participants needed to meet requirements for Skilled Worker visa sponsorship, and the relevant fees had to be paid, but the Home Office provided free expedited visa processing and bespoke case management support to mitigate administrative obstacles.

[An independent evaluation](#) conducted by the University of Oxford found that the DTMP pilot produced strong positive impacts for those who moved and for their employers. There were also

positive fiscal benefits: as of late 2023, refugees across TBB's programmes [contributed almost £1 million per year](#) in income tax and national insurance alone. Retention by employers was very high (96 percent).

Despite these impacts, the number of participants in the pilots remained low. [Key reasons were](#) demand-side barriers (employers were wary in a challenging economic landscape) and the cost of international recruitment. Unless these challenges are addressed, the scale of the new visa will be limited.

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## Broad principles in designing a visa

Any new Displaced Talent visa needs to follow four guiding principles.

1. **Non-refoulement:** The visa must provide durable protection. At no point should individuals risk being returned to a place of danger, including in the case of visa curtailment. Use of the visa should not disadvantage access to asylum or other protection routes if needed.
2. **Demand-led:** The system should enable UK employers to meet workforce demand by recruiting from displaced populations, through a process that aligns with business needs and is transparent and predictable.
3. **Refugee-centred design:** The visa must account for the realities experienced by displaced people. These include potential loss of documents; disrupted qualifications; the need for integration support; and protracted labour market exclusion.
4. **Complementarity:** This new pathway should not substitute for humanitarian resettlement and asylum. It should expand options for displaced individuals, rather than replacing conventional protection routes.

In establishing a complementary pathway visa, the government does not face a binary choice between a protection visa and a skilled labour visa. The above principles indicate that the pathway must work for both employers and beneficiaries. At the same time, it must also be financially and politically sustainable for the government.

There are, in effect, two conceptual “ends” to the spectrum of visa design. The government must decide whether to align the new Displaced Talent visa with the “efficiency” or the “protection” end of the spectrum. The former looks much more like a conventional Skilled Worker visa: it is fast and employer-led, with fees set by labour market considerations and few safeguards for visa holders. The latter grants more rights, offers comprehensive integration support, and offers protection from return (potentially including a rapid path to permanent status). Accordingly, it is likely to require long participant vetting, and may impose more burdens on employers. This will be much less likely to scale unless there are (substantial) fee waivers to encourage use.

Neither “end” of the spectrum is inherently better than the other. In roundtable discussions with stakeholders, we’ve heard that employers value speed, predictability, and simplicity, while humanitarian actors emphasise dignity and support, documentation flexibility, and protection via permanency— while still viewing the employer as the key stakeholder. Policymakers, meanwhile, seek scalable models that are also politically viable. Ultimately, the visa’s design must be a question of policy intention, the safeguards deemed necessary, and the extent to which scale is sought.

## Designing a new Displaced Talent visa

Six key design levers—and the trade-offs the government will need to consider as it walks the fine line—are assessed below.

**Table 1. Design levers at either “end” of the spectrum**

DESIGN ELEMENT	EFFICIENCY-ORIENTED	PROTECTION-ORIENTED
<b>Eligibility, identification, and qualifications</b>	Trusted referral using broad criteria	Protection-style assessment and interview
<b>Job matching</b>	Recruitment and selection undertaken directly by employers	Pool of pre-vetted candidates in specific occupations presented to employers
<b>Costs and risk allocation</b>	Paid by employer or candidate	Waived or state/philanthropy subsidised
<b>Documentation and case processing</b>	Current national biometric passports, diplomas, etc. required. Prioritised or standard visa timelines	Documentation flexibility: travel documents, attestations, alternative proofs. Processing is longer, potentially unpredictable, with layered screening or waivers
<b>Integration assistance</b>	Minimal: employer-led	Structured support: state or NGO funded
<b>Status, permanence, settlement, and family</b>	Temporary with extension options, and pathway to indefinite leave to remain (ILR)	Direct-to-ILR or temporary with extension options plus rapid pathway to ILR

### 1. Eligibility, identification, and qualifications

Access to the visa will need to be dependent on passing two checks: eligibility by virtue of protection status, and qualification based on skills and credentials. There are multiple options in both checks, however.

Firstly, eligibility. Is the visa only available for refugees, or will other displaced people (such as internally displaced populations) be potential beneficiaries? Which actors will determine eligibility? Would the UK government itself (the Home Office) do this, or would it require referrals from, for example, the UN refugee agency (UNHCR)?

POLICY OPTION	PROS	CONS
<b>1. Access only for referred refugees</b>	A clear protection narrative for public audiences	May exclude populations that would greatly benefit
	Removes significant administrative burdens from the Home Office: no need to e.g., verify “vulnerability”	Refugee Status Determination (RSD) by UNHCR can take a long time; individuals who have not yet received UNHCR RSD may therefore be ineligible to use the visa even if they meet the criteria
	May be more likely to have greatest net impact: <b>refugees often lack work rights</b> in hosting countries	Reliance on UNHCR may become more difficult in the context of shrinking capacity <b>following resource cuts</b>
<b>2. Access for a wider pool, e.g., internally displaced or “vulnerable” populations</b>	May give access to populations in need that would otherwise be excluded	Given the low numbers involved, the marginal refugee may benefit as much or more than the marginal member of a broader category
	Increases the recruitment pool for UK employers	Introduces major administrative burdens, e.g., need to define “vulnerable” populations

Secondly, qualification based on skill and occupational targeting. Will visa access be contingent on meeting narrow qualification requirements? There are two broad options.

POLICY OPTION	PROS	CONS
<b>1. Narrow occupational targeting, e.g., limited to roles on the Immigration Salary List</b>	Employer matching will be easier	Many displaced people, especially those most in need, will be excluded
	More politically acceptable	
<b>2. Broader skill bands, including recognition of prior learning</b>	Could complement any list of shortage roles, giving ethical access to non-sponsorable occupations when the domestic labour pool can't meet demand	Requires good quality assurance to maintain confidence
	Expands access, including to people who have skills without paperwork	Narrative: restricting access to just the TSL may be an easier public sell
		Exploitation: lowering skill thresholds, and salaries, may increase the likelihood of engagement from low-quality employers

Narrow occupational targeting and a more limited approach to credentials may reduce political risks and ease initial buy-in from employers, but may also dilute the pathway into preferential recruitment assistance for those who may already be more able to move. If the pathway is intended to serve as a work-based route to protection for a broader population, a wider range of eligible occupations into which to be recruited, and recognition of prior learning, are more likely to be needed. If this approach were taken, a salary threshold and sponsor compliance requirements could ensure that the route did not allow labour market undercutting; employers could also be required to record evidence

of domestic recruitment efforts. This is likely to be preferable to the requirement of a resident labour market test, which would **introduce significant administrative burdens** for employers and the government. Recognition of prior learning may also require partnerships with assessment organisations in current host countries.

Broadening the eligibility criteria (e.g., expanding access to internally displaced persons as well as refugees), meanwhile, would not necessarily require any changes to labour market criteria, but may significantly increase the assessment burden on the government or relevant trusted partners.

## 2. Job matching: Employer outreach vs. intermediary-managed

Access to the visa will be contingent on a job offer. Connecting beneficiaries to employers is therefore key. There are two main approaches available. In one, employers are given access to a dispersed new category of potential recruits and then left to approach them if they wish; in another, a system is established to proactively identify, vet, and match eligible individuals.

POLICY OPTION	PROS	CONS
<b>1. Pure employer recruitment:</b> employers recruit directly, potentially with support from intermediaries	Low cost and complexity for government	Increases the burden for employers, and will be challenging to scale
<b>2. Comprehensive matching support,</b> e.g., via a pre-vetted talent pool	Search and screening costs for employers will be reduced	Pre-recruitment vetting will require more government assistance, including upfront investment
	Placement success rates will rise	
	Scale will be easier to attain	
	The visa's legitimacy, both among employers and the public, may be increased	Vetting standards and governance will need to be set and maintained

The key question is how to lower transaction costs for employers without turning intermediaries into de facto gatekeepers or creating an unwieldy vetting system. We suggest that beginning with the second approach, but welcoming the first when it is possible, is the best way forward. It is also worth noting that advances in Digital ID and Verifiable Credentials may ease the vetting process for employers in the coming years.

## 3. Costs and risk allocation

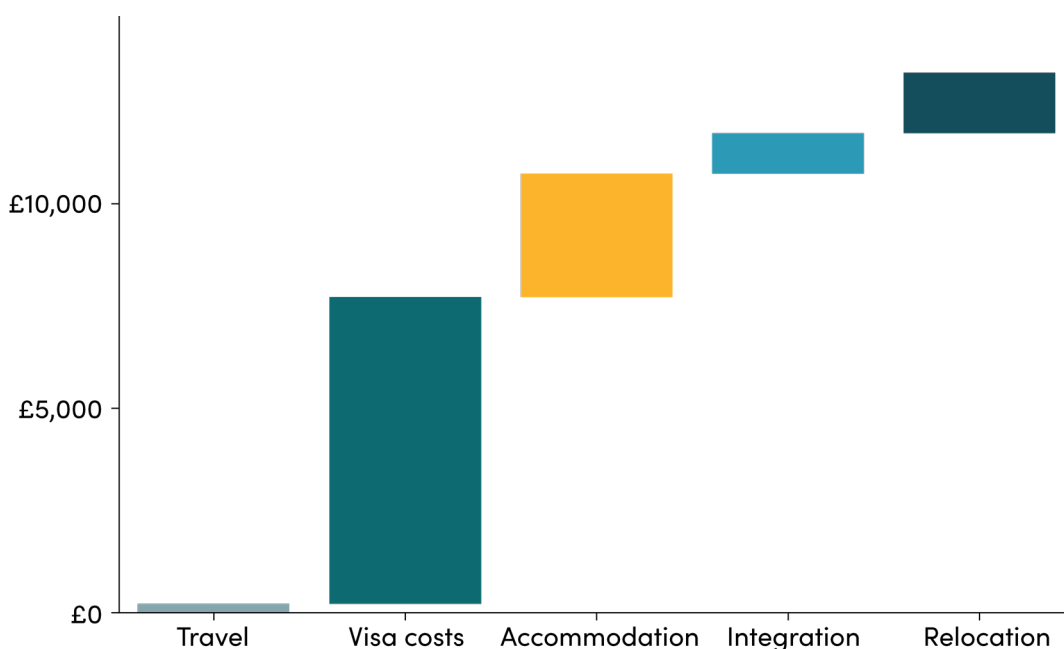
A key limit to scale is the costs imposed on employers. To be scalable, the cost of recruiting via the new visa should be competitive with the cost of recruiting a foreign national using a Skilled Worker route.

Currently, an employer hiring onto a three-year Skilled Worker visa would need to pay *obligatory* upfront administration costs ranging from a theoretical minimum of around £2,000 per person to a maximum of over £6,000, depending on a range of factors (explorable in the modelling tool in the [digital version of this note](#)). Fees employers face include a worker sponsor licence, certificate of sponsorship, and the Immigration Skills Charge.

The employer *may also pay* for visa fees and the Immigration Health Surcharge, in which case costs will be much higher. Total costs, beyond the initial year, will also rise given the recent move [to extend the period required for ILR](#). Employers are also likely to need to pay additional costs unique to hiring displaced workers; the total package was estimated [by the evaluation of the DTMP](#) (for which employers paid almost all costs) to be roughly £9,700 - £20,300 per hire (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Cost to employer of Displaced Talent Mobility pilot, per employee**

*Indicative costs obtained from the DTMP evaluation*



Source: Moussa and Sterck (2024), Skilled Worker Visas for Refugees: An Evaluation of the UK's Displaced Talent Mobility Pilot (DTMP).

If the government wants the new visa to scale and provide a genuine route to opportunities for more than a handful of people, some bespoke elements will be needed to make the route feasible for employers. There are three main policy options.

POLICY OPTION	PROS	CONS
<b>1. Maintain the status quo:</b> imitate the Skilled Worker visa	Lowest public spend	Requires heavy investment from employers (and potentially visa holders)
		Very unlikely to successfully scale.
		Hard to argue that this will provide genuine assistance to displaced populations
<b>2. Targeted subsidies,</b> e.g., government waiving or reducing some fees, or providing greater parallel support (such as for housing assistance, often taken on by employers)	More likely to be feasible for employers and to scale	Higher costs to government
	Has greater legitimacy than following the Skilled Worker model	Depending on the scale and object of targets, may still impose high costs on employers/visa holders
<b>3. Subsidies and significant cost relief tied to conditions:</b> additional concessions for e.g., small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), recruitment for TSL roles, or for employers providing significant integration assistance	Much more likely to scale access to the visa's opportunities	Greater costs to government
	Much greater legitimacy	More policy to alter, and greater risk of over-engineering: potential loss of simplicity valued by employers.
	Likely to improve integration outcomes	

A further option is to lower the salary threshold for the visa, reducing total risk to employers by lowering wage-bill exposure. Salary thresholds, however, may serve as a screening mechanism against labour market undercutting and exploitation; weakening them could therefore weaken the visa's political legitimacy and increase the risks of poorer job quality unless accompanied by stronger safeguards. In addition, it would not address the main barriers identified by [the DTMP evaluation](#), which found that high upfront recruitment costs and process frictions are the main constraints for employers. Given that the pathway is intended to balance labour mobility with protection, it may be preferable to keep salary thresholds at current levels, and reduce employer risk through more targeted measures using existing discount levers.

A final option is to create [a revolving fund](#). This would be a government-administered fund to cover key upfront fees and costs that create bottlenecks to scale, into which visa holders would repay once they started earning. Repayments would be low- or no-interest, contingent on fair income levels, capped, and paused during hardship. This model would, after an initial injection from the government and/or social impact investors, allow funding to be recycled to support subsequent cohorts without creating debt distress. This would, in essence, be an adaptation of [the longstanding](#)

Refugee Integration Loan, which itself has an explicit revolving aim. We recommend providing targeted support to employers to facilitate initial scaling, but offsetting this with a revolving fund to allow a gradual drawdown (and potentially exit) of government funding. Initial government funding could potentially be drawn from the [nearly £3 billion pot](#) raised via the Immigration Skills Charge, whose use is [currently unclear](#).

#### 4. Documentation and case processing

Refugees and displaced persons [frequently do not have access to all the documents normally necessary for obtaining a visa](#), including passports, employment records, and qualification certificates. This requires the Home Office to consider how to approach its documentation requirements. It has two main options.

POLICY OPTION	PROS	CONS
1. <b>Maintain strict documentary equivalence</b> , treating visa applicants as standard Skilled Worker visa applicants	Simple for caseworkers	Likely to exclude many target beneficiaries
	Does not require updating the Immigration Rules	Likely to lead to delays or prevention of recruitment, frustrating employers
2. <b>Use structured flexibility</b> , with a standardised approach to alternative evidence and a predictable approach to identity verification	Expands access while protecting integrity	Requires investment in caseworker guidance and partner capacity to vet claims
		Increased range of options may also lead to delays if caseworker training is not adequate

The second approach is likely necessary to achieve scale. It will be important that caseworker guidance is clear to ensure that decision-making is consistent, predictable, and as rapid as possible, and that the approach is embedded in the Immigration Rules. Without this, a large population of eligible individuals is likely to be excluded, and the process is likely to be too unpredictable for employers to participate.

The design of the case processing and application approval process will also need to be aligned with the approach taken to the use of a visa cap. A cap could operate in different ways: it could be fixed annually, or could flex based on demand; be allocated on a first-come-first-served basis, or by regional or sectoral prioritisation; and either operate on a strict “use it or lose it” basis or allow rollover of unused visas. Where demand exceeds supply, a mechanism for allocating scarce visas will also need to be decided. This could involve a pause until the allocation period resets, a lottery, or prioritising grants according to defined criteria. Experience with the monthly allocation system of the previous Tier 2 (General) route shows [the risks of controversy](#) if the system chosen is complex or unpredictable. If demand were high, an unpredictable approach to the cap could lead to lost time and

earnings for employers, frustration for visa candidates, and administrative time wasted. The cap is thus an element of visa macro-design that will also have implications for implementation.

## 5. Integration assistance

Displaced populations often have needs beyond those of conventional labour migrants. The success of their migration and integration will be increased through assistance, which could be variously provided by civil society, state actors, or the employer. The assistance likely to be necessary includes:

- **Pre-departure orientation**, covering rights in the workplace, community expectations, and work culture.
- **Post-arrival signposting** to housing, schooling, and services provided by community partners, such as language training for dependants. This may go beyond signposting to include provision of temporary accommodation prior to arrival; in the DTMP [this was often provided by employers](#).
- **Eligibility for settlement and integration services** provided for refugees, ensuring that displaced talent and their families can access the help needed to thrive in the UK. Again, this could include the provision of [a revolving loan fund](#), similar to the existing [Refugee Integration Loan](#), to assist with initial needs.
- **Alignment** of the visa pathway's approach with [devolved nations' integration offers](#) to ensure coverage of needs without duplication.
- **Safeguarding checks** to ensure that rights in the workplace and elsewhere are being respected.
- **Emergency support** in the case of loss of work, to avoid the creation of destitution or incentivising visa holders to switch into the asylum system. This could be provided by (temporarily) [lifting non-recourse to public funds](#) where necessary to prevent hardship, or by ensuring access to a revolving fund.

Reviews of complementary pathways implemented elsewhere [emphasise that safe pathways require a supportive ecosystem](#), in which government, civil society, and employers work together to ease integration. This is important to ensure both that participants do not go without support, and that the responsibility for providing support does not fall on any one actor— especially employers, for whom intolerable costs will prevent the success of the pathway. We recommend ensuring that visa holders receive the support needed throughout the process, in proactive partnership with civil society actors to avoid inefficient duplication of activities.

## 6. Status, permanence, settlement, and family

The final set of policy options concerns the durability of the pathway and the way beneficiaries are viewed: are they more like refugees or more like labour migrants?

The first, and most important, question concerns visa holders' status. As noted in the initial set of guiding principles, it is key that visa holders are protected from refoulement to a dangerous situation. There are, however, different options available in practice for implementing this, and they impact other policy levers.

**The first option is to treat the visa as a standard worker visa**, with an anticipation of its possible termination, but with bespoke elements to reduce the risk of return, discussed below. It should be noted, however, that visa holders would always have the legal right to seek asylum status. The challenge in designing the new visa is to avoid creating incentives for route-switching into the asylum system in search of stability. In addition, given that eligibility for the visa will be contingent on credible protection determinations, a substantial share of such claims would be comparatively straightforward.

**The second option is to use a novel combination: protection status on arrival without the need for full refugee status.** In this case, recognising that all visa holders have been screened for displacement status for visa eligibility, visa holders would on arrival be granted protection against removal but without receiving full refugee status. In practice, this would mean providing a visa status that is not contingent on employer sponsorship, with any cancellation due only to serious misconduct. This approach would be likely to require the creation of a new bespoke category under the Immigration Rules, borrowing properties from existing statuses. It could offer displaced individuals a reliable protection status following a productivity-based screening— a world first. The next question is how this dovetails with ILR timeframes, to go beyond the floor of non-refoulement to full permanence and reduced conditionality. The design question on this front is how a bridge can be found between the two.

Questions of status and the potential combination of bespoke elements in the visa's design will impact every other aspect of the route's feasibility and scalability. Below we provide a short, non-exhaustive list of questions about key levers.

### ***1. How long will visa holders need to wait for ILR?***

A longer baseline for Displaced Talent visa holders would greatly increase total costs to employers, potentially deterring participation, and also increase costs for visa holders. In addition, if the visa route does not provide access to a UK-issued travel document, a longer ILR waiting period would also increase the time during which visa holders must depend on travel documents issued by their country of origin. It will be important to avoid a long ILR timeline that incentivises switching into the asylum system; equally, there should be hesitancy about repeated high renewal fees if the government has already decided visa holders will not be subject to returns.

### ***2. If the visa is permanently contingent on employer sponsorship, what loss-of-work grace concessions will visa holders have?***

Without grace concessions, the risk of a transition into the asylum system in the event of job loss is much higher. The Skilled Worker visa offers a [grace period of 60 days](#) in which to find another employer willing and able to sponsor a visa. Given that employment on the Displaced Talent visa [may require additional employer buy-in](#), this may be challenging. This is especially likely for workers in SME-dominated sectors, where employers [are less likely to have existing sponsorship licences](#). This

situation would also be more likely to incentivise visa holders to accept exploitative employment rather than risk job loss. One option could be to introduce a bridging clause that automatically extends the status when a new non-licensed employer needs time to obtain a licence, or to waive the cost (but not the checks) associated with the licence for a second employer. Another could be to offer visa holders a longer grace period. Support could also be provided to help visa holders find employers in need of their skills.

### ***3. Will visa holders be able to bring their families with them?***

The separation of key family members—especially if they are sole breadwinners—from dependants in contexts of high vulnerability would cost the UK legitimacy as it establishes the new protection pathway. It may also [have negative impacts on visa holders' integration outcomes and mental health](#). The lifetime fiscal effects of the visa should also be considered, but [are not clear](#): while allowing [lower-earning dependants](#) may increase net fiscal costs, current trends indicate that many visa holders may move to parts of the UK with severe worker shortages, such as rural Scotland, which are eager to attract families.

### ***4. Will visa holders be treated as refugees or similar when it comes to fees?***

Refugee dependant relatives, for example, can [face much lower \(or no\) settlement fees](#) when applying from outside the UK; refugees are also exempt [from Immigration Health Surcharge and ILR fees](#), and from visa renewal fees. The approach to this question will significantly impact visa holders' experiences, and will also affect the likelihood and scale of employer participation.

In considering these options, we recommend careful thought as to the core purpose of this new visa. We note that the visa is intended to provide a flagship legal route demonstrating that the UK can fuse protection and productivity. If it is intended to serve a normative end in providing the good of transformative opportunities for those who most need them, a bespoke package of more generous approaches to fees, ILR, and other aspects is likely to be both justifiable and, for coherence, necessary. Without this, all that is created is a duplicate of the Skilled Worker visa with increased initial eligibility checks, which is likely to fail in its stated protection-via-productivity goal if the final policy combination results in high transition rates to asylum status.

Accordingly, we recommend that:

- Visa holders receive protection from return into danger on arrival, but without receiving full refugee status (including no recourse to public funds).
- The ILR waiting period should be reduced for visa holders to the extent politically possible, e.g., by making use of this legal route a condition for large deductions from the proposed 10-year baseline.
- If immediate protection from return into danger is not provided, significant grace concessions should be given in the event of loss of work, allowing visa holders the opportunity to resume productive activities and remain in the UK.

- Visa holders should be able to bring dependants (immediate family members), reflecting the fact that the Displaced Talent visa is intended to offer a durable protection solution.
- Visa holders should face reduced fees where possible, reflecting the fact that the visa is intended to serve an additional valued good beyond merely supplying labour.

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## Conclusion

The announcement of the new Displaced Talent Visa is something to celebrate. Its impact on refugee participants will be immense, while also benefiting UK employers. Its creation demonstrates the UK's leadership role in systematising preferential access to labour mobility for displaced populations, and will be of great interest to many other countries around the world. At a time of diminishing international protection opportunities, this visa is a trailblazer.

Its creation also forces the crystallisation of many different policy options into a principled, formalised, and predictable process. This requires making difficult choices between trade-offs, which must proceed from a clear understanding of what the visa is intended to deliver and a firm commitment to the key principles set out in this blog. How many people is this new employer-driven pathway intended to support? How much flexibility can be afforded to stakeholders to let it scale? Will visa holders be treated more as refugees, or more as Skilled Worker equivalents? The new costing tool available with the [digital version of this note](#) will help policymakers work out the financial impact of different choices.

Protection and productivity can be mutually beneficial. We call on the government to embark on a process of co-design, working with refugees, employers, recruiters, and researchers to ensure that trade-offs are managed well, and that the new visa can transform lives while benefiting all involved.

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