

POLICY NOTE FOR THE
BURNHAM GOVERNMENT



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

BREAKING THE HUMAN SMUGGLING POLICY TRAP

SMALL BOATS, SMUGGLING NETWORKS
AND THE CASE FOR A HOLISTIC RESPONSE

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SUMMARY

Small boat crossings of the English Channel have fallen sharply in 2026, and the temptation in Whitehall will be to treat that as a problem solved. It is not. While the fall is real, and the enforcement investment behind it is genuine, crossings into the EU as a whole have declined by a comparable margin over the same period, and shifts in displacement account for a further share. Prime Minister Burnham assumes office at a time when the dividends of a decade of investment in border control and international cooperation to end human smuggling are beginning to be felt, and this is an opportunity. What his predecessors have bought him is not a solution but an interval: a period in which the pressure has eased enough to make longer-term decisions possible. Those intervals are rare, and they close.

This note argues that the Channel is not an anomaly but the current British manifestation of a pattern that recurs wherever a high-demand migration corridor meets a hardened border. That pattern is a policy trap. Rising demand meets restriction; restriction raises the value of smuggling services; enforcement then clears out the low-level, community-embedded facilitators who once dominated the market and leaves it to better capitalized, more violent and less reachable criminal networks. Each step is rational for the actor taking it. The aggregate is a market that is more dangerous for migrants, more expensive for states, more explosive politically, and more profitable for organized crime.

Drawing on GI-TOC field research and on comparative evidence, this note sets out four elements that acute border crises require, and which work only in combination. It assesses how far the UK has assembled them, examines the emerging counter-flow of 'reverse smuggling' out of Britain as a live test of whether the trap can be avoided a second time, and offers nine recommendations for the Burnham government to escape the policy trap.

Key messages

- **Irregular migration has become the most politically destabilizing issue in contemporary democratic politics.** It has contributed to the fall of governments across Europe and to a broad rightward and authoritarian turn. The Channel is not an anomaly; it is the current British instance of a recurring global phenomenon.
- **We remain caught in a policy trap.** Rising demand for migration meets restrictive border policy; restriction raises the value of smuggling services; enforcement selects out low-level,

community-embedded facilitators in favour of consolidated criminal networks. The resulting flows are more dangerous, more expensive, more criminalized and more politically explosive. Only organized crime profits.

- **Acute border crises require a distinct response from long-term migration governance.** Responses to both are necessary, but the distinction needs to be understood. Conflating them has produced a decade of policy failure.
- **Global evidence from responses to acute border crises point to four elements that work only in combination:** (1) negotiated, cost-shared management with the country of embarkation; (2) a credible, deliverable and well-advertised returns policy; (3) upstream, intelligence-led disruption targeting network organizers, finances and supply chains; and (4) safe and legal migration routes, coupled with a deliberate public narrative. States that adopt only one or two of these elements do not achieve durable results. Smugglers adapt, routes displace and the trap re-forms.
- **The UK has progressively assembled the first three elements across successive governments.** The Starmer government's investment in enforcement capacity has produced visible results: with notable arrests of organized immigration crime facilitators, arrivals in 2026 are running roughly 43% below those in 2025, and the smuggling system is showing clear signs of stress. But EU-wide crossings fell by 37% over the same period, meaning that the marginal UK policy effect is considerably smaller than the headline figure implies.
- **A counter-flow of 'reverse smuggling' from the UK to the European continent is emerging, and it is policy-generated.** It is driven by visa asymmetries, post-Brexit restrictions on mobility, and conditions inside the UK asylum system. Crucially, the market on the UK side is still fragmented and pre-consolidation, making it the clearest available test of whether Britain can enforce controls without recreating the conditions that produced today's hierarchical Kurdish networks on the French coast. This counterflow presents both an operational challenge and a political opportunity to build cooperative relationships with EU states.
- **Prime Minister Burnham inherits that situation and has signalled that he will sustain enforcement.** But for the first time in a decade of British policy, he is treating safe and legal routes as part of the enforcement logic rather than as its opposite. That is the right instinct. The task now is to complete the framework rather than declaring victory.
- **The UK will remain part of a European and global irregular migration system whatever happens in the Channel.** Reduced Channel flows are not an exit from the problem. They are an opportunity to contribute to better migration management elsewhere.



INTRODUCTION: THE STAKES

For most of the post-war period, migration was treated as a technical portfolio, a matter of visa categories, labour market shortages and consular administration. Now, in much of the democratic world, it is the issue most likely to end a government.

The cause is not the absolute scale of movement, which remains historically modest as a share of global population. Even after a decade of compounding crises, one in every 70 people worldwide is forcibly displaced, and 2025 saw the first decline in global forced displacement in more than a decade.¹ What drives the politics is the *visibility* and *perceived uncontrollability* of irregular arrivals. A state that cannot demonstrate control over who enters its territory forfeits a foundational claim to competence. Voters punish this loss of control severely, and increasingly reward parties promising to restore it by whatever means. Britain has had seven prime ministers in a decade; migration has accelerated the downfall of several, and Reform UK's polling position rests substantially on this issue.² Just days after Prime Minister Burnham visit to Dover in early August, Reform UK announced its intention to mount what it described as the largest military operation in the Channel since the Second World War.³ While the legal viability of this a proposal is questionable, its political potency is not.

This is the environment in which any UK response must be designed. A policy that is analytically sound but politically illegible will fail; one that is politically satisfying but substantively inadequate will fail more slowly and more expensively. The task is to satisfy both tests.

In *Migrant, Refugee, Smuggler, Saviour*, Peter Tinti and I set out what has since become a well-established finding: restrictive border policies and the professionalization of migrant smuggling are not opposing forces but mutually reinforcing ones. Tighter rules inspire entrepreneurs to create new, more dangerous and more criminal routes.⁴ Subsequent work by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) on militarized responses to organized crime has traced the same pattern across other illicit markets. The research found that hardening a border without addressing the underlying economic drivers of the illegal trade simply raises the price and the level of professionalism and violence of those who service it.⁵ Nothing in the decade since has disturbed this conclusion. The Channel is one of its most visible contemporary confirmations.



THE POLICY TRAP

The policy trap set out in this brief, in which restriction and criminalization reinforce each other, manifests itself in five stages. Each stage is individually rational for the actors involved, but the aggregate is destructive for all stakeholders except the criminal networks.

Demand for migration is rising, and will continue to rise

The drivers of irregular movement are not policy variables that destination states control. Protracted conflict and repression in Sudan, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Somalia and Myanmar; demographic pressure and labour market failure across the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and South Asia; and climate-related stress on agricultural livelihoods together generate a growing pool of people for whom movement is the only rational strategy. Add to this the transformation in communications and transport infrastructure, which has made distant destinations reachable by facilitating connections between migrants and smugglers, demystifying journeys and, crucially, making the living standards of further flung countries newly visible and comparable for populations who would previously have moved only locally or regionally.⁶

This matters for policy design because it means that the demand curve is highly inelastic. People for whom the alternative is destitution, conscription or persecution do not respond to marginal increases in journey cost or risk in the way that consumers of discretionary goods respond to price. The GI-TOC's field guide on smuggling as a vector in human migration, and its earlier route-based research on movement from Africa to Europe, found that raising the cost and risk of a journey changes the method and the provider, but not the decision to move.⁷ This is the single most consistent finding in the literature on smuggling, yet it is also the most consistently ignored in policy.

Smugglers are a vector and an amplifier

A critical analytical error in most political discourse is to treat smugglers as passive service providers who respond to pre-existing demand. They are not. They are active makers and shapers of the market.

Smuggling networks perform two functions that shape migration patterns independently of migrant intent. First, they *identify* viable corridors by scanning for weak border controls, corruptible institutions, permissive legal environments and gaps in surveillance. Second, having identified a corridor, they *recruit* into it, marketing routes to populations who had not previously considered that destination. The GI-TOC has described this as smuggling functioning as a vector in migration: the network does not merely transport people; it actively propagates irregular migration.⁸

The evidence for active market-making is unambiguous. Networks advertise routes, prices and services on platforms such as TikTok, Telegram and Facebook, with the production values of legitimate travel marketing; gangs are offering discounts to migrants who film successful crossings.⁹ Recent GI-TOC research found Vietnamese *môi giới* brokers promoting Ireland on TikTok as a less saturated alternative to the UK and Germany, making claims about job opportunities and relaxed migration policy.¹⁰ This is not demand being served; it is demand being manufactured by commercial actors with a direct interest in volume.

The consequence is that flows do not build gradually in proportion to the underlying push factors. They surge, because a network has identified an opening and monetized it. These surges overwhelm reception capacity in destination communities and along transit routes, generating the highly visible disorder that produces political crises.

The fortification reflex

Governments facing this disorder respond by hardening borders and adopting hostile postures towards migrants, reducing resettlement quotas, restricting family reunification, limiting access to asylum procedures, extending detention, and narrowing or closing legal pathways.

Each of these measures reduces the supply of safe, legal, managed migration. None of them reduces demand. The gap between supply and demand is precisely the market that smugglers occupy, and every restriction widens it. Restriction is, functionally, a subsidy to organized crime.

Enforcement consolidates the market

This is the least intuitive stage of the trap and the most important for designing a Channel response.

Around the world, human smuggling has historically been low-barrier, semi-formal and community-embedded, often performed by former migrants, diaspora members and local transport operators accountable to some degree to the communities they served. In that form it functioned as a resilience mechanism: imperfect and exploitative at the margins, but broadly responsive to reputational constraints. The GI-TOC's route-based research across West and North Africa has documented smuggling as a livelihood embedded in trading and transport economies of long standing, with community sanction acting as a partial check on abuse, and this embeddedness eroding with increased enforcement pressure.¹¹

Sustained enforcement destroys this layer first. Low-level facilitators lack the capital to absorb asset seizure, the operational security to evade surveillance, the legal resources to survive prosecution and the transnational reach to reroute around disruption. The actors who can absorb these costs are precisely those with prior organized crime capabilities: corrupt access, the capacity to use violence, established money laundering channels and cross-border logistics.

The market does not shrink under enforcement pressure; it consolidates. Prices rise, margins concentrate, and control passes to actors who are less accountable, more violent and more criminally sophisticated. Smuggling networks begin to have the capacity to invest substantial resources in 'fronting' transport costs (enabling them to ultimately charge more), bringing in expertise (such as high quality document forgers or money launderers), or offering the sort of high-level bribes more traditionally associated with drug trafficking or other higher-value illicit markets.

GI-TOC's field research on the Channel found exactly this profile: territorially organized Iraqi Kurdish networks acting as arbiters of departure, with defined zones, violent competition over launch sites, pragmatic inter-clan cooperation, kingpins operating from outside European jurisdiction, and a typical operational cell of eight to 12 people with specialized functions.¹² This is not a cottage industry; it is what a cottage industry becomes after a decade of enforcement pressure.

The five losses

As the policy trap plays out, five things follow.

- 1. The state pays twice.** Once in direct enforcement expenditure, and again in the political cost of visible failure. The UK spent approximately £700 million on the Rwanda partnership, which resulted in just four voluntary departures.¹³ Australia's offshore processing has cost, according to the most commonly cited estimates, in excess of 1 billion Australian dollars a year.¹⁴ In neither case did this expenditure purchase the intended outcome.
- 2. Migration is weaponized, domestically and diplomatically.** Domestically, it becomes the organizing issue of populist mobilization. Diplomatically, it becomes leverage. The events in Ceuta in late July 2026 illustrate this: an estimated 50 000–60 000 people crossed into the Spanish enclave from Morocco within roughly 24 hours – at least 67 died, most drowned or killed in the crush at the Tarajal breakwater.¹⁵

Attribution remains genuinely contested, but Spanish officials have suggested that smuggling networks are exploiting and misrepresenting a Spanish Supreme Court ruling from 29 June 2026, which restricted the summary return of migrants intercepted while swimming.¹⁶ While Morocco has denied facilitating the crossings, commentators have noted the tactical withdrawal of Moroccan auxiliary forces from perimeter posts just 10 days after Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez's visit to Algiers.¹⁷ The 2021 precedent, when roughly 8 000 people entered Ceuta after Brahim Ghali, leader of Western Sahara's Polisario Front, was admitted to Spain for medical treatment – widely seen as Moroccan retaliation through a deliberate loosening border controls – is a clearer case of deliberate instrumentalization of migration.¹⁸

The policy lesson does not depend on resolving the attribution issue. It is this: a destination state that has outsourced its border control to a third country has become dependent on that country, and dependencies can be used as leverage. Whether or not Rabat opened the gate in July 2026, everyone in the system understands that it could have done so. This is the same leverage that Libya, Turkey, Hungary and others have used to weaponize migration and force concessions. The risk applies equally to any UK arrangement with France, Belgium or another partner.

- 3. As the market consolidates, migrants become more vulnerable.** With less competition for business, smugglers face reduced pressure to protect their reputations – so prices rise, debt bondage deepens and the safeguards that once limited the worst abuses erode. In the Channel, the clearest indicator of this is boat occupancy: the average has risen from seven people per boat in 2018 to 41 in 2022, 53 in 2024, 62 in 2025, and approximately 67 in 2026 to date, with the highest monthly figure on record being 72 in July and a single boat in August carrying 230 people.¹⁹ Smugglers are not overcrowding boats because demand has risen, but because the supply of equipment has been squeezed and each launch window is scarcer. Enforcement success and mass casualty risk are, on current trends, rising together.



A 'mega dinghy' carrying 230 people is pictured off the coast of France ahead of its crossing to Dover on 10 August – the highest number recorded on a single small boat to date. *Photo: Station SNSM Berck-sur-Mer on Facebook*

4. **Social cohesion is damaged.** Between 30 July and 7 August 2024, an estimated 29 anti-immigration demonstrations and riots took place across 27 towns and cities in the UK. Mosques, community centres, libraries and hotels housing asylum seekers were attacked. In Rotherham, a hotel was set alight, and in Tamworth a hotel accommodating 135 asylum seekers was targeted by people attempting to set fire to it. By the end of August 1 280 people had been arrested and 796 charged.²⁰

While the subsequent inspection found the causal factors to be more complex than initially apparent – citing social deprivation, austerity and economic downturn, political policies and decisions on migration and asylum, and declining trust in policing, with online disinformation acting as an accelerant²¹ – two features of that episode should concern policymakers. First, the targets were migrant accommodation sites chosen by the central government and imposed on communities without consultation, converting a national policy decision into a local grievance. Second, most of those involved were local and had no prior history of disorder-related offending. Once established, this social dynamic is difficult to reverse, and it imposes costs on settled migrant communities that have no connection whatsoever to irregular arrivals.

5. **Only crime profits.** Headline valuations of the Channel smuggling economy circulate widely and should be treated with caution, but the strongest evidence that crime is the principal beneficiary lies not in any single valuation or revenue estimate but in the observable behaviour of the market. The trade has grown consistently in scale and sophistication over the past eight years, from ad hoc dinghy launches to integrated supply chains facilitated by organized crime gangs. Most tellingly, competition between groups has become territorial and violent. The GI-TOC's Channel fieldwork has documented identified zones on the French coast, violent competition over launch sites and negotiated agreements between clans. These are the defining features of a market generating rents worth fighting over.²² Markets that are marginal do not produce turf wars. It is this competition, rather than any headline figure, that provides the most robust evidence of the market's value.



WHAT WORKS: THE FOUR ELEMENTS THAT TOGETHER COUNTER SMUGGLING

The Channel is the current acute instance of a pattern that recurs wherever a high-demand corridor meets a hardened border. Examples of this phenomenon abound, from the Eastern and Central Mediterranean to the Andaman Sea and the US's southern border. Recognizing this matters, because it means the UK can draw on a substantial body of comparative evidence rather than improvising a response.

The common thread is that acute border crises are a distinct policy problem that stems from decisions taken as part of long-standing migration governance. A government that responds to an acute crisis with the instruments of long-term governance will be overwhelmed before these measures can take effect; a government that meets the long-term challenge with crisis instruments will find itself in a permanent state of emergency. The Burnham government needs to have both tracks running simultaneously and to explicitly understand that they are different.

Global evidence – synthesizing the GI-TOC's field research and the comparative literature and analysis – points to four elements that are required to address smuggler-led mass migration surges. These are sequenced from short-term stabilization to long-term sustainability, and none is sufficient alone. The failure mode of partial adoption is consistent and predictable.

Element 1: Negotiated, cost-shared management with the country of embarkation

To address a high-pressure border, the need to negotiate a bilateral arrangement with the state from whose territory migrants depart will be inevitable. This will need to cover surveillance, interdiction, prosecution, policing of launch sites and probably a returns agreement. Nothing else in the framework will work if the departure coastline or border is uncontested. But the design principles matter more than the existence of the arrangement.

Migration management must be genuinely cost-shared and framed as a joint problem. Where one state is cast as the supplicant and the other as the gatekeeper, the arrangement becomes a permanent source of friction, a lever for domestic blame-shifting in the paying state, and as Ceuta demonstrates, a diplomatic vulnerability. The UK–France relationship has periodically drifted towards this exact pathology, with British commentary treating French officers as insufficiently zealous and French officials resenting that depiction. The Burnham government should deliberately reframe the arrangement around shared and reciprocal interests: disrupting criminal networks operating on French and Belgian soil, for example, is in the security interests of France and Belgium, not a favour to Britain.

Visible deployment has real value as a confidence measure, but not as a solution. Coastguard patrols, drones and joint command arrangements can demonstrate to domestic audiences that the state is taking action, and this demonstration buys the time and permission required for slower processes to take effect. But beach interdiction against a determined and adaptive network is expensive, manpower-intensive and subject to rapid tactical circumvention. It is a stopgap, not a solution.

Displacement must be anticipated and built into the arrangement's geography. The evidence from the Channel is emphatic. As French beach patrols intensified, smugglers switched to 'taxi boats', inflating and launching craft on inland canals and rivers before cruising the coast to collect passengers wading through the surf. French officials assessed this method as successful in around 81% of crossing attempts in 2025.²³ Launch sites then spread southwards to the Dieppe area, nearly 200 kilometres from the traditional Calais–Dunkirk zone, and into Belgium. There, recorded launch attempts rose from two in all of 2025 to more than 30 in the first four months of 2026.²⁴ An arrangement limited to a particular stretch of the French coast will simply displace the problem to the coastline adjacent to it. It needs to be trilateral or quadrilateral from the outset, with a standing mechanism for anticipating future shifts and extending coverage as departure geography changes. Building up planning, relationships, law enforcement liaisons and other partnerships before this emerges, rather than after, is critical.

Element 2: A credible, deliverable and well-advertised returns policy

This is the most contested element in the framework, and it is important to be precise about what the evidence does and does not support, because both the advocates and the critics of deterrence tend to overstate their case.

The claim that survives scrutiny. If a destination state can demonstrate, at scale and reliably, that irregular arrivals do not result in settlement, the marketing proposition of the smuggling network is directly undermined. This is a supply-side intervention aimed at the smuggler's sales pitch, not primarily a punishment of the migrant. The smuggler sells an outcome, and if it cannot be delivered, the product loses value.

The EU–Turkey statement as the working precedent. The most instructive example is also the most misread. The March 2016 statement, in which the two parties agreed to collaborate on managing irregular migration, is usually characterized as a returns deal and criticized as such. Its actual architecture was a package. Alongside the return of irregular arrivals from the Greek islands, the EU committed to resettling one Syrian directly from Turkey for every Syrian returned. The programme envisaged providing resettlement for up to 72 000 people, €6 billion in support for refugee-hosting communities in Turkey, visa liberalization for Turkish citizens, and the opening of the Turkish labour

market to Syrians under temporary protection.²⁵ The explicit stated purpose of the one-for-one mechanism was to substitute an orderly, legal pathway for a deadly irregular one.

What followed was more interesting than the political framing on either side allows. The returns component barely operated: fewer than 2 300 people were returned from Greece to Turkey before the mechanism was essentially frozen in March 2020. The legal pathway, by contrast, delivered on a far larger scale, with roughly 45 000 Syrians resettled from Turkey to EU member states.²⁶ Nonetheless, sea arrivals in Greece fell by roughly 80% in the first year and have never returned to 2015 levels.²⁷

Three conclusions can be drawn, each of which is directly applicable to the UK. First, a returns arrangement can be politically viable and can survive a decade of contestation, but only if it forms part of a package that offers something to both the partner state and the migrant population. Second, the credibility of the returns threat was highly effective in deterring people from making the journey, even though the mechanism itself processed very few people. This suggests that the announcement effect is real but perishable, and depends on the arrangement being visibly operational. Third, the humane component was not a concession bolted on to soften the package; it was the part that functioned. This is the design lesson that the UK has yet to fully absorb.

Why Rwanda failed and what that teaches. The UK's Rwanda partnership failed for the same underlying reason, but in a more acute form: it was never operationalized. This failure was not administrative bad luck. The scheme attracted sustained opposition from human rights and migrant rights organizations, faced repeated legal challenges culminating in the Supreme Court's finding that Rwanda was not a safe third country, and required primary legislation attempting to legislate that finding away.²⁸ The scheme consumed approximately £700 million and produced just four voluntary departures. It was, as a matter of observable fact, not a deterrent, because there was little to be deterred by.

The lesson is not that returns arrangements are inherently futile. Rather, a returns policy must be operationally deliverable and demonstrably compatible with international law before it is announced. It is also far more likely to survive if it is sold as one component of a package that includes legal routes. An announced but undeliverable policy incurs the full financial and reputational cost, has no operational effect and, because it is loudly promoted, actively discredits subsequent measures. The EU-Turkey deal survived a decade of criticism because it offered something to both parties and to the asylum seekers using the route.

Where the UK now stands. The UK-France 'one in, one out' arrangement is the right instrument, but it is currently operating at insufficient scale and is scheduled to conclude at the end of October. As of 30 June 2026, approximately 1 087 people had been returned to France, compared with 27 920 arrivals: a return rate of around 4%.²⁹ The University of Oxford's Migration Observatory assesses that the arrangement could be effective in deterring people if a high share of arrivals are swiftly returned, but the current share remains low.³⁰ Four per cent signals that the risk of return is real but remote, which, for someone who has already accepted a one-in-a-hundred risk of drowning, is not decisive.

Recommendation. Scale the scheme substantially at the October 2026 review, with a published target expressed as a percentage of arrivals rather than an absolute number, and ensuring the legal and operational capacity to sustain it. The July 2026 High Court judgment on reconsideration rights for trafficking victims is a reminder that building removal capacity without the adjudicative capacity to support it produces bottlenecks, not returns. A returns policy is temporary architecture: its function is to break a market proposition during an acute phase. It need not be permanent.

Element 3: Upstream, intelligence-led disruption of the networks

If Element 1 buys time and Element 2 attacks the sales proposition, Element 3 is where lasting damage to the criminal economy is done. It is also the area in which the UK has made the most genuine progress, and where the greatest untapped capacity remains.

Target the organizers, not the operators. This is the most important design principle, yet it is the one most frequently violated under pressure to demonstrate arrest volumes. Those piloting boats and guiding groups to launch points are overwhelmingly migrants or former migrants who are often working off their own passage debt. They are entirely replaceable in this system and possess no meaningful network knowledge. Prosecuting them generates statistics but no disruption. The actors who matter most are the organizers, financiers, equipment brokers and money movers, most of whom are outside European jurisdiction. Three recent convictions showcase this to positive effect: Amanj Hasan Zada, a Lancashire-based Iranian national was sentenced to 17 years in prison for running a network from Sulaymaniyah in Iraq;³¹ Ahmed Ebid, a London-based Egyptian national was sentenced to 25 years for exploiting asylum seekers;³² and Adem Savas, a Turkish supplier estimated to have provided the equipment used in around half of all 2023 crossings before his conviction in Bruges.³³

Build four specific analytical capabilities. Conduct social network analysis to identify the high-centrality nodes whose removal would actually degrade capability. Social media monitoring should treat smuggler marketing as an intelligence source rather than content to be taken down, since advertising reveals pricing, routing, capacity and competitive positioning in near real time. Financial investigation following hawala payments and, increasingly, cryptocurrency flows. The July 2025 sanctions package set an important precedent by designating 25 targets – including hawala operators moving smuggling proceeds, a Chinese manufacturer advertising inflatable boats suitable for Channel crossings, and gang leaders in the Balkans and North Africa – in the first use of the UK's global irregular migration and trafficking sanctions regime.³⁴ Finally, there is supply-chain disruption: the boat-and-engine pipeline from Chinese and Turkish manufacture through Bulgaria and Germany has proven to be the sector's most vulnerable point, with Bulgarian seizure protocols forcing networks to use longer and more expensive routes, and over 600 boats and engines confiscated.³⁵

Cooperate with source and transit states as a standing capability. The UK–Iraq arrangement that enables National Crime Agency (NCA) operations in the Kurdistan Region is the right template, and should be replicated along the corridors that matter now. Given the shift towards Eritrean, Sudanese and Somali arrivals, this increasingly means the Horn of Africa rather than the Iraqi and Albanian corridors that dominated from 2018 to 2022.

Monitor continuously, even when there is no current crisis. Smugglers are versatile in terms of route and method. Migration often follows ancient corridors, but these pathways are now connected transnationally at an unprecedented speed. In the longer term, what is required is not a Channel taskforce but a standing route-monitoring function capable of detecting the formation of corridors before they become crises.

Work with non-state and community-based actors. State institutions cannot see what community organizations, diaspora networks and civil society groups can. Research by the GI-TOC in Ireland has surfaced the convergence of Vietnamese brokerage with Kurdish and multinational facilitation networks in northern France. This convergence may create opportunities for more targeted disruption, precisely because it breaches the closed character of Vietnamese networks that has made them so resistant to intervention.³⁶

Element 4: Safe and legal routes, and the public narrative

This is the element that the UK has consistently omitted for its migration response, and its omission is the principal reason why the first three elements have not delivered a durable result.

The mechanism is straightforward. Where no legal pathway exists, everyone with a protection claim or economic imperative must buy the services of a criminal network. Legal pathways do not eliminate irregular movement, but they relieve the pressure differential that makes smuggling viable and compete directly with the smuggler's product – precisely the logic articulated by the prime minister at Dover on 2 August.³⁷

Legal status is itself a protection against exploitation. The clearest recent demonstration of this is the European response to displacement from Ukraine. Within days of the February 2022 invasion, the EU activated the Temporary Protection Directive for the first time since its adoption in 2001. This granted Ukrainians residence permits, access to the labour market, housing, medical assistance and education for children across member states, without requiring them to enter an asylum procedure. The GI-TOC assessed the organized crime risks associated with that displacement in detail and found the speed of the legal response to be the single most important protective factor. It removed the need to purchase smuggling services, allowed people to work legally rather than informally, and thereby closed off the dependency on which trafficking and labour exploitation ordinarily rely.³⁸ Where risks persisted, they were concentrated among precisely those groups excluded from or unable to access the directive: unaccompanied children, non-Ukrainian third-country nationals, Roma Ukrainians and people with disabilities.³⁹

Two points follow for the UK. The first is analytical: legal channels for entry and legal status are among the strongest known determinants of resilience to trafficking and exploitation. This means that expanding them constitutes a counter-crime measure as well as a humanitarian one. The second is political: the reception afforded to Ukrainians in the UK, most visibly through the Homes for Ukraine scheme,⁴⁰ demonstrates that the British public will support large-scale, generous admission of refugees with full legal rights, provided it is presented as a managed, legal and government-directed process. The determining factor was not public generosity; it was whether the state appeared to be in control of who was arriving.

Be honest about the evidence base on economic contribution. The GI-TOC would caution against the maximalist framing that migration advocates sometimes adopt, because it is vulnerable to attack and its collapse would discredit the wider argument. The ODI's synthesis reveals that net fiscal impacts are generally minimal, at roughly plus or minus 0% of GDP, and highly context dependent.⁴¹ The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's findings are more defensible: labour migrants have the most positive impact on the public purse, and employment is the single biggest determinant of net fiscal contribution.⁴²

The correct conclusion is therefore not 'migration pays for itself' but something sharper and more actionable: the fiscal and economic outcome of migration is determined almost entirely by whether migrants can find work quickly and legally. That is a policy variable, not a fact of nature. It also a direct argument for regularized pathways and rapid labour market access, and against prolonged processing limbo, which is the single most reliable way of converting a potential net contributor into a net cost.

Design routes that can compete with the specific product smugglers sell. Generic resettlement commitments do not do this. Routes must reflect the actual nationalities of Channel arrivals – currently Eritrean, Afghan, Sudanese, Iranian and Somali – and their actual motivations, which include family reunification, established diaspora ties, labour demand and protection. A resettlement scheme that admits people from populations who were never going to attempt the Channel is a humanitarian policy not a counter-smuggling policy. Both are legitimate, but they should not be confused; only the latter will reduce crossings.

Attend to mobility asymmetries and protection gaps. The evidence of reverse smuggling discussed in the following section shows that the design of legal pathways can create smuggling markets as readily as it can close them. Where a nationality faces a Schengen refusal rate of around 55% but a rising rate of UK study visa issuance, the UK has inadvertently become a legal gateway to an illegal onward journey. This is a solvable coordination problem, not an immutable feature of the system, and it should be raised in the UK-EU mobility discussions that the prime minister has indicated a willingness to engage in. Legal pathways that end at a border that people intend to cross will inevitably be completed by smugglers.⁴³

Treat the public narrative as infrastructure, not decoration. Safe and legal routes are politically viable only if the public understands them as a mechanism of control rather than generosity. This framing is accurate: managed routes enable the state to select who enters, in what numbers and on what terms, which is the precise opposite of the smuggler-led alternative. The government should also invest in destigmatizing settled and incoming migrant communities, who bear the social cost of a discourse that has nothing to do with them. The Ukrainian precedent is again instructive here, and its lesson is an uncomfortable one: the same public can support one displaced population warmly while rejecting another, and the difference lies substantially in how the government framed, sequenced and controlled the arrival.

Why partial adoption fails

The failure mode is consistent in all the above cases. Element 1 alone relocates departure points. Element 2 alone, if undeliverable, wastes money and credibility; if deliverable but unaccompanied, it pushes migrants towards more dangerous routes. Element 3 alone consolidates the market into fewer, more capable hands. Element 4 alone is politically indefensible amid visible disorder and will be withdrawn at the first sign of crisis. These are not a menu but a framework system. Partial adoption returns the state back into the policy trap, just by different routes.



THE UK'S POSITION: AN INHERITANCE WORTH PROTECTING

Successive UK governments have, sometimes by design and sometimes unintentionally, progressively assembled the first three elements. The Starmer government in particular made substantial and well-directed investments in enforcement and analytical capacity.

The scale of this investment is clearly visible. The number of NCA officers assigned to organized immigration crime increased from 376 at the start of 2025 to almost 800 by August 2026,⁴⁴ with a comparable uplift seen in France. In the year to April 2026, arrests rose by more than half, reaching approximately 300, alongside 59 convictions and 400 recorded disruptions. The Home Office also reported that over 1 100 boats and engines have been seized since July 2024.⁴⁵ Organized immigration crime now accounts for roughly a quarter of NCA operational activity.

The headline outcome is real. By 1 August 2026, arrivals stood at 14 526 – 43% below the 25 436 recorded at the same point in 2025, and 14% below the figure for 2024.⁴⁶ This is the most substantial year-on-year reduction since crossings began. More persuasive than the headline, however, is the pattern of adaptation, which is diagnostic of a system under genuine stress. Four indicators stand out:

- **Departure geography has widened dramatically.** Launches have spread from a concentrated Calais–Dunkirk zone to as far south as Dieppe and Fécamp, and across the border into Belgium, where attempts rose from two in 2025 to more than in the first four months of 2026. Networks do not accept an additional 45 nautical miles and unreliable engines on longer routes unless departing from the preferred coastline has become genuinely difficult.
- **Boats are getting bigger and being more dangerously loaded.** The rise to 72 people per boat in July 2026 is not a demand signal but a supply signal: equipment is scarcer and each successful launch must carry more people. GI-TOC field research suggests that smugglers are also working harder to retrieve their boats for reuse.
- **Organizers are relocating from the UK.** Following a series of significant arrests, the controlling tier is moving to jurisdictions perceived as safer. This is a clear effect of disruption, even though it complicates prosecution.
- **Migrants are moving on.** This is the indicator worth highlighting most strongly to the government, because it is the least visible and the most consequential for how the Channel problem is understood.

The counter-flow: reverse smuggling and what it tells us

A recent article published by the GI-TOC highlights a quieter movement that has emerged in the opposite direction: migrants crossing irregularly from the UK to the European continent, often using the same smuggling infrastructure in reverse.⁴⁷ This movement is still small, but it is growing, and its composition is revealing. A support worker at the Dover Outreach Centre recorded 155 migrants passing through Dover and heading towards France in 2025, compared to 100 the previous year – a 55% increase.⁴⁸

Recent prosecutions have brought to light the operating model. The Belabes network, run from south London, was found to have organized at least 26 trips between December 2022 and September 2023, charging £1 200 a head and generating an estimated £287 000 during this period. Taxi drivers were used for the London-to-Kent leg because a cab carrying several passengers attracts no suspicion. A parallel network run by Algerian national Azize Benaniba facilitated more than 20 runs from Dover to Calais over a similar period, concealing migrants – including children as young as five – in airtight, refrigerated trailers. More recently, in September 2025, two Romanian truck drivers were arrested at Dover after being found carrying 49 people, most of them Bangladeshi nationals.⁴⁹ In all instances, the migrants were to be transported across the Channel in the direction of mainland Europe.

Three features of this emerging market matter for policy.

First, it is generated by policy, not by push factors abroad. Three drivers are evident. *Legal entry asymmetry*: for some nationalities, the UK is now an easier legal entry point to Europe than the Schengen area itself. Bangladeshi nationals face Schengen visa refusal rates of roughly 55%, against an overall EU rate below 15%. Meanwhile, UK-sponsored study visas issued to Bangladeshi nationals increased by 71% in 2025.⁵⁰ The result is a structural arbitrage: legal entry to Britain on a short-stay visa, followed by onward movement onto smuggling routes within 24 to 72 hours of landing at Gatwick or Stansted airports. *Post-Brexit immobility*: some of the movement that was legal before 2020 is now irregular, and networks have moved quickly to exploit this. *Conditions in the UK*: prolonged processing times, homelessness and repeated contact with law enforcement have led some people who arrived by small boat to treat Britain as a transit space en route to Ireland, Spain, Portugal, Germany or Italy. The UK also ceased tracking visa overstayers after 2020, leaving a substantial unmeasured population with motive and exposure to exploitation.⁵¹

Second, the structure of the market on the two sides of the Channel differs strikingly. This difference is the consolidation thesis of ‘The policy trap’ section, rendered as a natural experiment. On the French side, the trade is hierarchical and territorially controlled. It is dominated by Kurdish networks after a decade of sustained enforcement, which favoured the actors best equipped to withstand disruption. In contrast, on the UK side, where enforcement against outbound smuggling has barely begun, the picture is more fragmented: Romanian, Polish, Lithuanian, North African and South Asian actors handle transport, concealment and onward facilitation, with no single group controlling the entire chain. The chain is modular, comprising core organizers coordinating routes and clients, logistics handlers arranging transport and staging, and opportunistic actors (drivers, taxi operators and sometimes migrants themselves) paid small sums for individual legs.

That contrast provides the clearest available evidence for the argument in outlined above. The French coast shows what a smuggling market looks like after 10 years of enforcement: consolidated, hierarchical, violent and expensive. The UK side shows what one looks like before. The question for the Burnham government is not whether to enforce against this emerging market, but how to do so

without repeating the sequence that produced a highly organized network like the Kurdish 'Ranya Boys': enforcement without legal alternatives, which strengthens exactly the actors it is intended to remove.⁵² The market already shows signs of specialization; the question is not whether it will develop further, but how quickly.

Third, the Channel is no longer a one-way problem. London and Paris continue to negotiate agreements centred on movement towards Britain, while networks are adapting week by week. It is no longer accurate to frame this as a UK problem managed at France's border or a French problem addressed through policing. Onward movement is visible in destination data too. Vietnamese asylum claims in Ireland rose from 12 in 2020 to around 520 by early October 2025, with GI-TOC fieldwork indicating that many of these claimants had originally intended to settle in the UK or Germany.⁵³ Should the EU, where migration management is equally a tier 1 political issue, focus resources on the UK routes like it has on the Mediterranean, the game could change considerably.

However, this reduction is not exclusively a UK policy achievement: Frontex recorded a 37% reduction in irregular border crossings into the EU in the first half of 2026.⁵⁴ A UK fall of 43% against a European fall of 37% is a far more modest claim of national policy effect than the headline implies, and ministers should be briefed accordingly before they make overstated claims.

Changes in origin-country conditions also affect the pool independently of anything the UK does, and the current data illustrates why arrivals-driven policymaking is too reactive. Between 2018 and 2025, Syrians accounted for roughly 8% of small boat arrivals to the UK. Following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, approximately 1.3 million Syrians returned from abroad in 2025, nearly triple the previous year's figure. This reduced the global Syrian refugee population from around 6 million to 4.9 million and contributed to the first decline in worldwide forced displacement in more than a decade.⁵⁵ A significant proportion of the fall in UK arrivals reflects this shift rather than any British measures.

At the same time, a countervailing pressure is building. Sudan has become the world's largest displacement crisis, with 9.1 million people internally displaced at the end of 2025. The Rapid Support Forces' assault on El Fasher, the capital of Sudan's North Darfur state, from October 2025 displaced more than 100 000 people towards Tawila to the west and Chad.⁵⁶ Sudanese nationals already constitute around 11% of Channel arrivals in the UK. Displacement of this magnitude takes between 18 months and three years to register at a European external border and even longer to reach the Channel.

This is the operational case for Element 3. A policy calibrated to last quarter's arrivals data is responding to a displacement event that occurred months, if not years, ago. Standing route monitoring exists precisely so that governments can anticipate the Sudanese corridor rather than discover it too late.

In addition, crossings are seasonally concentrated in the European summer months, and the full-year picture will not be clear until the autumn. Most soberingly, a decline in crossings has not meant fewer deaths: Mediterranean fatalities have risen even as crossings have declined, and the Channel's own fatality trend has not tracked its volume trend. Claiming victory in August based on summer figures is exactly the error that has discredited previous ministers, and could undermine Burnham's leadership early on.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE BURNHAM GOVERNMENT

The prime minister's remarks at Dover in August were arguably the most analytically coherent statement on this subject by a British prime minister in a decade. Two elements stand out. First, he expressed a commitment to sustain enforcement, stating that the government would be 'relentless', while acknowledging that the public 'don't like the idea that the border looks like it's not controlled'.⁵⁷ This is an accurate reading of both the operational and the political requirements.

Second, and more significant, was the reasoning offered for safe and legal routes: the UK needs 'to build a system that offers safe routes for people as well, because that also takes away the selling point of the gangs'.⁵⁸ This is the framing that has been missing from British policy for a decade. Previous governments treated safe routes as a humanitarian concession to be granted only once the boats had stopped, but this guaranteed they would never be granted because the boats would not stop without them. Burnham has instead framed legal routes as an instrument of counter-smuggling. This is analytically correct and what hopefully makes the policy politically survivable.

Based on this, we propose nine recommendations:

- 1. Publish the framework as a holistic strategy.** The four elements set out above should be published as a single, integrated UK strategy with a named senior owner, rather than as a series of ad-hoc announcements. Burnham's approach to migration and small boats has not been much advertised beyond the Dover speech. Putting out a clear strategic approach would be timely and significant advancement on his predecessors. Politically, it would inoculate the government against the charge of drift when any individual element underperforms. Operationally, it would justify the sequencing of decisions that have never been made explicit, and allows later steps to still move forward even when earlier actions have not demonstrated results.
- 2. Scale the returns arrangement, with a published percentage target.** As discussed above, a 4% returns rate is a demonstration, not a deterrent. The October 2026 review of the 'one in, one out' deal should set a more robust target expressed as a share of arrivals, potentially tiered by nationality to reduce the risk of contravening asylum agreements. This should be accompanied by investment in the adjudicative capacity required to sustain throughput against legal challenge. Announce nothing that cannot be delivered. Engage proactively with rights-based advocacy bodies to reduce the backlash that undermined the Rwanda proposal, and marry this announcement with that of legal migration options, as the EU-Turkey statement did.

- 3. Extend the bilateral architecture to a Channel-and-North-Sea arrangement, covering France, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands.** In addition, expand wider EU cooperation on intelligence-led enforcement and migration management. The current framework has already been outrun by departure geography, and there are nascent signs of potential risk in the Nordic countries, which could become another axis in the irregular migration ecosystem. Build the mechanism for further extension into the agreement itself, and present the whole as a shared European approach to security and migration cooperation, rather than as a British demand.
- 4. Target the organizers, not the operators, and highlight the strategic value of doing so.** Arrest and prosecution volumes are a poor proxy for market disruption but are tempting under political pressure. The Home Office and the NCA should publish disruption metrics that distinguish between different tiers of actors, so that the strategic value of a small number of high-tier convictions is legible to the public and to Parliament. The UK is already demonstrating genuine successes here, which are worthy of record and emphasis.
- 5. Institutionalize route monitoring as a standing function.** This should not be a Channel taskforce, but rather a permanent capability to detect corridor formation and displacement. This should include corridors where there is presently no crisis, as well as, specifically, the Ireland and Common Travel Area corridor, and the Horn of Africa and Sudanese corridors now forming. In a volatile and unpredictable world, it is impossible to anticipate future migration challenges without this capacity in place. Fund and formalize partnership with non-state research and community organizations, which consistently identify network adaptations earlier than state institutions do.
- 6. Design safe and legal routes that align with the actual arrival profile and provide immediate access to the labour market.** These routes should map onto the movements of Eritrean, Sudanese, Afghan, Iranian and Somali populations, among others, and onto the real drivers of migration: family reunification, diaspora ties, protection and labour demand. Prolonged processing limbo is the single most reliable way of turning a net contributor into a net cost, and the fiscal case for legal routes depends entirely on immediate access to legal work options. The UK's response to the Ukrainian crisis demonstrates that rapid access to legal refugee status and labour markets is also the most effective protection against trafficking and exploitation.
- 7. Treat outbound smuggling as a live policy area now, while the market is still fragmented.** The reverse flow is currently small, with only 155 people recorded through one Dover outreach service in 2025. But it is growing at a rate of 55% year on year, and its structure is pre-consolidation. Two specific actions follow. First, resume tracking of visa overstaying, as the absence of data since 2020 leaves a significant population entirely unmeasured. Second, raise the mobility asymmetries driving the arbitrage in UK-EU discussions, because the alternative to addressing these issues is to enforce the UK's own visa policy against a market it is creating.
- 8. Be disciplined about attribution in public.** As noted above, the reduction in irregular crossings to the UK is in part a function of a Europe-wide decrease, rather than being solely the result of national policy – and Syrian returns account for a further share of the falling numbers. While the marginal UK policy effect is real, it is considerably smaller than the headline suggests. A government that claims full credit for the reduction in irregular crossings into the UK will be held responsible when numbers inevitably rise again as European conditions change, and will have spent the credibility it needs for the more difficult arguments in favour of legal routes.

- 9. Prepare the public narrative before the next incident, not after it.** The risk of mass casualties in the Channel is rising, not falling, because boats are more heavily loaded than at any point since 2018. Mediterranean deaths have risen even though crossings there have fallen. A government that has not established, in advance, why its strategy is the one that reduces deaths will lose the argument in the fortnight after a disaster, and will be pushed towards exactly the maximalist gestures that restart the trap. Any response is caught between two opposing forces: the humanitarian outrage of migrant rights groups and the rhetoric of nationalistic political opportunists. A narrative crafted for only one camp inevitably collapses under pressure from the other. The strategy therefore needs to be comprehensive, addressing the four elements to counter smuggling, so that it can withstand pressure from both fronts when the crisis intensifies.



BEYOND THE CHANNEL: THE UK IN A GLOBAL SYSTEM

A final point, and the one most likely to be forgotten if the numbers continue to fall: Reduced Channel crossings will not remove the UK from the global irregular migration system; they will simply change its position within it. Britain will remain a high-demand destination, connected to source regions by diaspora, language, colonial history and labour market pull; it will remain adjacent to a European system under sustained pressure; and it will remain a jurisdiction whose enforcement decisions displace flows onto its neighbours, exactly as its neighbours' decisions do to it.

Evidence of reverse smuggling makes this concrete rather than abstract. Britain is now, for a small but growing number of people, a transit country, and for some nationalities it is a legal entry point to an illegal onward journey into the Schengen area. A state that is simultaneously a destination, transit space and origin of irregular migration cannot coherently describe the Channel as someone else's border.

The events in Ceuta in July should be read in Whitehall not as a distant Mediterranean problem but as a demonstration of three things that apply directly to Britain: externalization creates dependency and dependency creates leverage; a border can be overwhelmed in a single day, regardless of prior investment; and European solidarity in such moments is thin. Prime Minister Sánchez's characterization of several member states' response as 'selfish' reflects a structural problem, not a diplomatic accident.⁵⁹

Over the past two years, the UK has built genuine, and in some respects world-leading, capability in analyzing and disrupting migrant smuggling networks. This capability is a national asset and it is also an exportable one. However, a government that successfully reduces pressure on its own border and then withdraws from cooperative efforts will find that the corridors it closed have reopened elsewhere and will eventually revert. A government that instead contributes its capabilities in intelligence-sharing, financial investigation, supply-chain disruption and route monitoring to partners facing acute pressure will be buying insurance against its own next crisis.

There is no national solution to a transnational market. The choice is between managing it collectively and being managed by it individually. The Burnham government has, on the evidence of the past fortnight, understood the first part of that proposition. The test of the coming year is whether it acts on the second.



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