

Looking ahead 2026

Looking at the year ahead in UK Immigration | 2026

As we settle into 2026 following a year filled with various changes and proposals in UK immigration, it's essential to consider what lies ahead. The most notable reforms are outlined in the May 2025 white paper titled "Restoring Control Over the Immigration System." This document details proposed immigration reforms aimed at reducing net migration and enhancing border controls. These changes will be enacted progressively throughout 2026. Below is a timeline that breaks down when each measure will take effect.

January 2026 Higher English Language Requirements from 8 January

The English language requirement for some categories will increase from B1 (GCSE level) to B2 (A-level standard)

February 2026 Full rollout of the Electronic Travel Authorisation from 25 February & end of Earned Settlement consultation

Visitors from 85 visa-free countries to obtain digital pre-travel permission

Spring (March/April 2026) Major reforms to the settlement rules via the implementation of the Earned Settlement model

Earned Settlement consultation period ends on 12 February

December 2026 Temporary Shortage List (TSL) set to expire on 31 December 2026

We expect the Earned Settlement changes to come into force from April 2026 following a consultation period which will close on 12 February

January 2027 Graduate Visa duration to be reduced

The TSL which permitted below degree level roles to be sponsored will expire end of December unless MAC recommends otherwise

From 1 January 2027 the post study work visa permission will reduce from 24 months to 18 months

January 2026 - Higher English Language Requirements

Already in force from 8 January, the English language requirement for Skilled Worker, High Potential Individual and Scale-up visa applicants has increased from B1 (GCSE level) to B2 (A-level standard). This only applies to new applications made in these categories. Applicants already on these routes who will apply for an extension in the same route will not be required to demonstrate the higher English proficiency levels.

February 2026 - Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA)

Following the end of an implementation period, the ETA will be fully rolled out from 25 February. Visitors of around 85 visa-exempt countries (including the US, Canada and EU/EEA states) will need an ETA to travel to the UK including those who wish to transit through the UK. Without this pre-travel authorisation, visitors will not be allowed to board or travel to the UK.

Businesses should be aware of the key details and inform their employees or update their internal travel policies.

- The ETA costs £16
- Once approved the ETA will be valid for two years or until the expiry of the passport expiry, and allows multiple visits of up to six months;
- ETA status will be checked at boarding and travel will be denied without valid permission;
- Each traveller, including children and infants, will require their own ETA

We can expect there to be greater scrutiny of the visitor requirements so employers should ensure that business visitors and their scope of activities are in line with the rules.

April 2026 - Earned Settlement Changes to come into force

The consultation period for the Earned Settlement proposals will end on 12 February 2026 and by Spring we can expect to see the changes come in to affect. Current proposals for an earned settlement model would extend the standard 5-year qualifying period for settlement to at least 10 years in most cases.

The earned settlement model will focus on certain requirements and attributes to either reduce or penalise the baseline qualifying criteria. Mandatory requirements will be:

1. **Character/suitability** – like the current good character requirements but with potentially tougher rules where there has been criminal record or non-compliance with immigration laws.
2. **Integration** – English language at a minimum level of B2 will be required and passing Life in the UK test
3. **Contribution** – this new requirement requires annual earnings over £12,570 for a set period before the application potentially 3 to 5 years but yet to be determined.
4. **Residency** - Lawful, continuous residence in the UK will remain necessary

Partners of British citizens who fall under the Appendix FM route will continue to retain their 5-year route to settlement.

Another major reform will be abolishing the 10-year long residence route which allowed individuals to aggregate time spent in certain visa categories to qualify for settlement after 10 years.

December 2026 - The Temporary Shortage List (TSL)

Occupations on the TSL which is certain below degree level roles are currently allowed to be sponsored. This list as its stated in the name is temporary and is currently set to expire on 31 December 2026, unless the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) recommends its continuation.

What can employers and individuals start doing now

Employers should review their workforce and plan ahead. With longer sponsorship periods and already increased costs for sponsorship, employers will need to budget for these increased costs for hiring migrants.

Employers should also plan talent hire and identify migrants on a Graduate visa and consider transitioning them to a sponsored visa earlier before the shortened visa rules come in to force end of this year.

Employers should also review their internal business travel policies and procedures and update any policies to reflect the mandatory ETA requirements.

It is strongly advised that individuals who are approaching the current 5 year qualifying period should apply for indefinite leave to remain before April 2026.

Hudson McKenzie are following the Earned Settlement consultation closely and we will release further updates as they come out.

If you have questions about esports immigration or need advice on the best visa route for your circumstances, contact us today for tailored advice and support at londoninfo@hudsonmckenzie.com.

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