

Humanist Perspective

Migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers

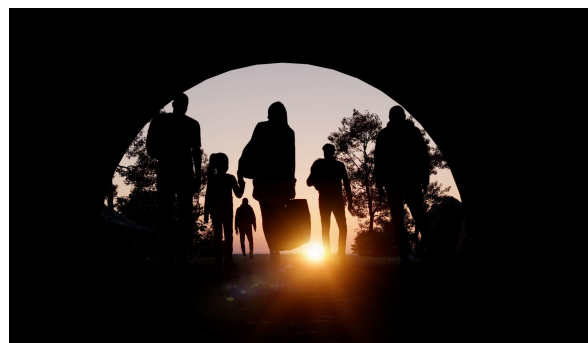
A humanist approach

When considering ethical and practical questions, humanists typically try to apply **evidence, empathy, and compassion** to inform their decisions. This is often guided by their respect for **personal autonomy** and **human rights**, and a desire to support people's wellbeing. They believe that this is the **one life** we have and that everyone should have the **freedom** and opportunity to find **happiness** in the here and now.

Humanists will generally be supportive of the rights of people to migrate to seek better lives for themselves or to escape danger. They recognise refugees and asylum seekers as fellow human beings and are supportive of International Refugee Law. Many humanist organisations campaign to ensure their governments follow such expectations.

Why might humanists be supportive?

- **Empathy and compassion:** Humanists often emphasise imagining oneself in another's position. If people have to flee their home due to war, violence, or oppression, humanists typically say we should respond with care, helping them to find safety.
- **Human rights:** The right to seek asylum is recognised by the United Nations. Humanists support upholding international commitments so that those facing genuine threats can rebuild their lives in safety.
- **Global responsibility:** Many humanists take a global rather than purely national view, working for the welfare of all humans, recognising our 'shared humanity' and what we have in common.
- **Looking at the evidence:** Many studies show migration can have positive effects, such as contributing new skills and cultural diversity. Humanists advocate for evidence-based policies rather than fear-driven ones.



The challenges

Humanists also recognise some of the challenges that immigration brings and believe it is important to consider the impact on others.

- **Considering the consequences:** Each country has limits on housing, education, and healthcare. Government policies should therefore be carefully planned, balancing compassion with workable solutions. This isn't an argument against migration itself, but for making sure policies are effective and minimise harm. Empathy and compassion should also be directed to those people already living in a country who may be affected by immigration.
- **Living well together:** The state should help migrants to integrate and settle smoothly, proactively fostering understanding between people in order to avoid division. It should provide support, language education, and opportunities.

Overall, humanists typically believe immigration can be positive as long as it is handled fairly and responsibly.

Question: How might these humanist values apply in tackling questions about migration?

- Acting compassionately
- Recognising everyone as human
- Treating other people in ways you would like to be treated yourself
- Respecting freedom and human rights
- Looking at the evidence

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Foreign policy

Many humanists would say that the UK should support peace, development, and human rights in countries overseas as that would likely reduce the need for people to seek new lives elsewhere. Some might say that a world that creates refugees has a responsibility to shelter them.

Opposition to harm and exploitation

Humanists oppose forms of migration that involve harm. For example, they condemn human trafficking and modern slavery (where people are coerced to move and then exploited), and call for tackling criminal gangs who exploit vulnerable migrants. Also, they might criticise dangerous migration routes (like small boats across the sea) because they want to prevent loss of life. The ethical solution, they'd argue, is to create safer legal routes for refugees so people aren't forced to risk their lives.

Costs and benefits

While humanists often believe we have an obligation to refugees fleeing persecution or deprivation, many believe that it is important to look at the benefits and costs when deciding on wider immigration policy. While immigration has boosted economic growth, the benefits have not always been felt by everybody, particularly the least well off.

'The welfare and happiness of humanity is at the centre of humanist morality and ethics. We believe that humankind can be compassionate and kind. The basic principle that underlies our morality is the Golden Rule: treat others in a way that you would like to be treated yourself. So, if we think about it, it's obvious that we should be supportive of those seeking refuge and asylum, and we should make the effort to understand why people migrate for other reasons.'

Michael Rosen and Annemarie Young,
authors of *What is Humanism?*
and *Who are Refugees and Migrants?*



'We believe that refugees and migrants are first and foremost human beings who hold human rights and should be treated as such. Refugees and migrants not only contribute economically and demographically to our societies, they also bring with them new cultures and traditions that contribute to a rich and diverse society.'

Pierre Galand, former President of
the European Humanist Foundation



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Definitions

Migrant: Any person seeking a new home in a different country. *Economic* migration is when people move to seek a better life, often to find a better job. This type of migration is normally made through choice. Some migrants have travelled legally, others illegally (without the necessary permission). The vast majority of immigration to the UK is legal.

Refugee: Someone forced to move from their home country, often due to conflict, famine, or natural disaster, but could also be based on a well-founded fear of persecution. This is sometimes called *forced* migration.

Asylum seeker: Someone seeking permission to live in a new country as their health, life, or liberty is at risk in their country of origin. This might be because one has political or religious views that don't align with the state, or if one is LGBT in a country where such freedoms are restricted.

Data

- In 2024, about 16% of the UK population were born in another country.¹
- In 2024, net migration was estimated to be around 430,000 people.² This was less than 2023 but is high by historic standards.
- The majority of immigrants come to the UK for work, study, or family; a smaller portion are refugees fleeing persecution
- In 2024, over 100,000 people claimed asylum in the UK – a record high.³ In recent years around half of asylum claims were successful.
- Recent conflicts in places like Syria and Ukraine have led to large numbers of refugees. The UK has introduced special schemes to help some groups, such as Ukrainians fleeing war and Afghans at risk from the Taliban. Around half a million people from these two countries have been resettled in the UK under these schemes.
- The UK receives fewer asylum seekers per person than the EU average.⁴

An evidence-based approach

In deciding policy, humanists believe it is important to look at the evidence. Humanists argue for *fact-based* migration policies that look at the empirical data. Policies on economic migration should weigh up the pros and cons. Claims made about costs and benefits should be fact-checked to find out if they are true.

Migrants often make a positive contribution to the economy. The UK has an ageing population and immigrants are often of working age. They often do jobs that other people don't want. They also generally contribute more in taxes than they claim in benefits. However, not everyone benefits. Some people feel that immigrant populations take away their opportunities to find work or drive down wages for working people.

History

It can be important to recognise that, in some ways, we are nearly all immigrants. Human beings evolved in Africa and migrated across the rest of the globe. The UK has had many waves of migration in the last 2000 years: Romans, Anglo-Saxons, Vikings, Normans, and more recently people from all over the Commonwealth, many of whom were invited here because we needed their skills and expertise to support services such as the National Health Service.

¹ The Migration Observatory, University of Oxford

² The Migration Observatory, University of Oxford

³ UK Parliament

⁴ UK Parliament

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A history of humanist campaigning

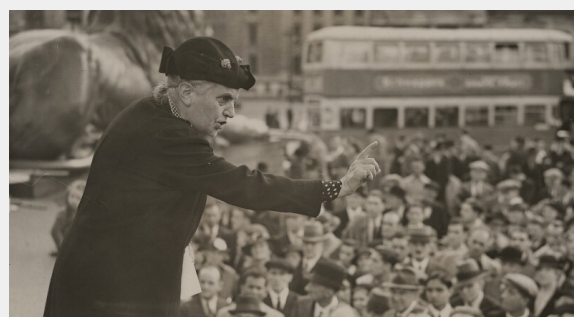
There is a long history of humanist and non-religious campaigning and action to provide support to displaced people.

Activists like **Mary Sheepshanks** helped Belgian refugees who were fleeing the German invasion in 1914 at the beginning of World War One. She organised shipments of food to Belgian refugee camps and campaigned successfully for the British government to admit Belgian families into the UK. She even formed a committee that aided hundreds of German women stranded in Britain to return safely home.

After World War One, Sheepshanks continued her humanitarian work, and in the 1930s, as fascism rose in Europe, she helped evacuate child refugees from the Spanish Civil War and sheltered people in her own home, including Russians fleeing Stalin and Jews escaping Nazi Germany.



Eleanor Rathbone championed the rights of refugees fleeing from Nazi persecution in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. She believed the UK had a *moral duty* to protect these individuals and lobbied tirelessly to make sure Jewish and other persecuted families could find safety. Her compassion and her action led her to become known as 'the MP for refugees'.



Humanist **Nicholas Winton** organised the rescue of 669 Jewish children from Czechoslovakia just before World War Two, and helped to place them with families in the UK. This was called the *Kindertransport* (children's transport).

'What is needed is something in which [we] can all believe irrespective of religion... that something is ethics. Goodness, kindness, love, honesty.'

Sir Nicholas Winton



Nicholas Winton memorial at Prague train station

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Humanist action today

Humanist organisations often argue that governments should follow international human rights law, treating refugees and asylum seekers fairly and humanely. During the European refugee crisis of 2015 (when many Syrians fled civil war), humanist organisations across Europe urged governments to respond with compassion and solidarity.

Recently, the UK Government proposed sending people seeking asylum in the UK to Rwanda. Humanists UK challenged this as Rwanda was not considered a safe country for non-religious people. Rwanda has laws against 'blasphemy', meaning non-religious people could be fined or sent to prison. They argued that sending someone to a country where they might suffer from the same risks they were trying to escape was neither sensible nor ethical.

Alf Dubs, a Patron of Humanists UK, was born in Prague and was one of the Czech children who escaped the Nazis on Nicholas Winton's *Kindertransport*. Once a refugee himself, he now campaigns to support the rights of refugees and asylum seekers, especially children.



'Humanists believe that everyone should have the right to lead a dignified and fulfilling life, including enjoyment of freedom of thought and expression. Sadly, for many people, that is not possible in their home countries, and so they have to seek that life elsewhere. These are people who need our compassion and support... Refugees have contributed so much to the life and character of the UK... Being a refugee is already one of the hardest things imaginable. We should be doing what we can to support them, not making things even worse.'

Natasha Walter is a human rights activist and founder of the charity *Women for Refugee Women* that works to support and empower women seeking asylum in the UK.



'My humanist perspective is threaded through everything I do... We can't wait for a better life in the hereafter but need to create the best world possible right now for everyone and for our planet. We can't sit back and wait for someone else to do the work... we each have to get on and do what we can ourselves.'

'My grandfather came to the UK as a refugee in 1939, as did my grandmother. He was imprisoned and tortured by the Nazis and then spent three years on the run across Europe. Today we criminalise and despise people who make similar journeys. The post war consensus around the need to treat refugees decently is collapsing, and people are suffering needlessly every day as a result.'

'It's horrible to see how governments have used migrants and refugees as a scapegoat for wider failures in society. It's hard right now to build empathy around what women who cross borders are going through. But change is urgently needed – we really need to build a transparent asylum process in which women who seek safety here can get a fair hearing.'

'In my work at Women for Refugee Women I got to know many women who had rebelled against religious norms in their countries and had been persecuted as a result, and I think that women in Britain should stand in solidarity with women who face such repression worldwide.'

'It's vital to speak up for humanism and rationalism in a world in which more and more people are falling into misinformation and prejudice.'

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Protecting the non-religious

Some people face persecution for being atheists, humanists, or non-religious in countries with strict religious laws. Twelve countries have laws that punish 'blasphemy' or apostasy with death, and many more enforce harsh penalties. Humanist groups, such as Humanists UK and Humanists International, campaign to ensure non-religious individuals receive a fair hearing when they seek asylum.

Humanists International supports humanists at risk in countries where their beliefs are considered to be crimes. They help them to escape and relocate to places where they are no longer in danger, and then put them in contact with a community who is able to support them.

Humanists UK supports non-religious people seeking asylum in the UK if returning to their country of origin would put their safety at risk. Since 2018 the charity has supported over 100 asylum seekers, over 50 of whom have been granted asylum.

'Humanists UK supports asylum seekers fleeing persecution because the freedom to hold and live by your own beliefs is a fundamental human right, and one which is central to humanism. The people who approach us for help are fleeing violence, abuse, torture, and imprisonment at the hands of their state and/or community. We believe in compassion and freedom of religion & belief, and those humanist values drive our work.'



Clare Elcombe Webber,
Director of Humanist Care

Case Study: Research a real-life non-religious asylum seeker's story. What challenges did they face? How did humanist groups help? Reflect on why freedom of belief matters in asylum claims.



Following death threats from members of his family and community, **Hamza bin Walayat** left Pakistan for the UK, where he claimed asylum. His claim was initially rejected due to the Home Office's

misunderstanding of humanism and what it means to be non-religious. Following support from Humanists UK and a petition signed by over 12,000 people, his asylum claim was accepted in 2019. The case led to new training for Home Office staff on humanist asylum claims.

'I have believed in humanist values since I was a child, but as I grew up I realised how dangerous it was to share those views'

Gulalai Ismail is a humanist and human rights activist from Pakistan. When she was 16, she founded Aware Girls, an organisation that works to empower women and girls in her country.



Because of her human rights activism in Pakistan, Gulalai faced persecution and harassment. She was accused of blasphemy and terrorism, and in 2019 she was forced to flee Pakistan and seek asylum in the USA.

'It's not easy being a humanist in Pakistan. Most of the time humanists have to fake being religious: they fake praying, they fake keeping fast, because it can be life-risking for them to express themselves and tell the world who they are... I had to leave my country to save my life and to be able to continue raising my voice.'