

Andy Burnham MP  
House of Commons  
London  
SW1A 0AA

X July 2026

Dear Andy,

Congratulations on winning the Makerfield byelection and your return to Parliament. We were pleased to see your campaign focus on hope and solutions, not division and blame games.

The local elections in May exposed a stark warning for our movement. Across the country, long-standing Labour support has fractured, with many progressive voters feeling unheard and alienated, while Reform has capitalised on that disillusionment to make gains in areas we once considered secure. At a time of deep economic pressure and growing political volatility, this is not simply an electoral setback but a signal that our current approach is failing to unite our voter coalition.

Immigration and asylum is a test case for how we do so. Polling in this area shows that most voters are “balancers” who understand the benefits and the costs of migration. In this group, some prioritise order and control; while others prioritise compassion, justice and rights. We must speak to *both* groups simultaneously and persuasively. Currently, we are seen to talk much more about control than compassion. And when we talk about compassion, progressives do not believe us because our hostile rhetoric has already alienated them. That rhetoric also raises the salience of asylum as a problem in the minds of those already anxious about lack of control. Our approach needs a refresh.

Talking tough is not the same as effective action. The reductions in the asylum backlogs, in small boat crossings and in hotel use that we have seen are the fruits of what our Labour Government started in its first 12 months or so. We also started an asylum accommodation pilot with local authorities - to regionalise the system and move away from rip-off private contracts. We pursued greater international co-operation – like the UK-France pilot, and persuading Germany to amend its criminal law on small boat parts. We were starting to do what we promised: controlling our borders while making the asylum system work fairly.

But we have allowed ourselves to be blown off course. After Reform’s “Boris wave” rhetoric, we decided to fight on Reform’s territory. Targeting a group of migrants that followed the rules, and applying this retrospectively, does not pass the fairness test for a compassionate but firm system. We do not recall being asked on the doorstep to make it harder for migrant workers to settle in the UK. Yet we are expending political capital, huge Home Office resource, and losing progressive voters on an Indefinite Leave to

Remain reform which few really understand or want. People in Macclesfield talked about irregular migration, not making it harder for nurses and care workers to settle here. With a 10-20 year settlement period, the UK would be an international outlier - weakening our soft power and our appeal as a place to study, invest, build a life and form relationships. It would weaken our communities and undermine our own strategies on child poverty, violence against women and girls, and homelessness. And the proposals would cost the state billions. This kind of reactive policy making is anathema to who we are, what we stand for, and how we should do politics.

In the area of regular migration, we need a national migration levels plan. This should set out expected migration flows, labour market needs, public service impacts and policy choices, all supported by an annual statement to Parliament. It should form a core part of our mission to raise living standards over the next decade through delivering good growth in every postcode. Without a plan on regular migration, we are undermining two key planks of your change agenda:

- **Powering reindustrialisation.** The starting point is that we must aim to re-industrialise using our domestic labour force. We need welfare reform that is compassionate, targeted and empowering, and a significant expansion of technical education and apprenticeships. But there is a time lag associated with these policies. We need an immigration plan that will support reindustrialisation through helping our businesses recruit the people they need. Sectors like construction, advanced manufacturing and clean energy all need a migration system that is planned, strategic and responsive to labour market needs.
- **Empowering local government.** We believe that the current policy approach too often does things to local authorities rather than with them. Policies that delay settlement, deepen insecurity, increase homelessness or leave families in greater poverty do not simply create hardship; they push cost and pressure on to councils, housing departments and children's services. England's councils and mayoral combined authorities should play a bigger role in this policy area because they already manage many of the local services affected by these issues. Stronger local government involvement would help build more resilient and cohesive communities across England.

On asylum and refugees, we must start by stripping out the hostile rhetoric which triggers existing anxieties. We must also deliver an efficient asylum system, which should include: closing asylum hotels and investing savings into national housing stock; improving the asylum accommodation system – starting with progressing local authority pilots that have been paused; ending rip-off contracts and the privatisation premium; tackling the appeals backlog by resourcing the existing appeals body properly; and building a coalition of willing countries around a future vision for refugee protection that is not reliant on irregular migration. We need an expansion of managed asylum routes, a review of the pause on family reunion for unaccompanied minors, and the introduction of the right to work for asylum seekers after six months.