



## Northern Ireland refugee statistics

December 2023

### At a glance

This briefing contains some statistics about people seeking sanctuary in Northern Ireland.

The number of people seeking sanctuary in Northern Ireland has increased in recent years. While this has undoubtedly placed pressures on services, it is necessary to consider these statistics in a wider global context. Northern Ireland hosts 2.6% of all the people in the UK who are seeking sanctuary.<sup>1</sup> The UK ranks 16<sup>th</sup> in Europe for the asylum applications per head of population.<sup>2</sup> Worldwide, the large majority (70%) of the world's refugees live in neighbouring countries, which tend to be low and middle income countries.<sup>3</sup> It is Global South countries – not Europe – which are hosting most of the world's refugees.

The briefing is arranged in two parts.

**Part A** looks at asylum seekers. An asylum seeker is a person who has travelled to the UK by their own means to request international protection (asylum). By doing so, an asylum seeker is exercising their right to seek asylum as enshrined in international law.

**Part B** focuses on 'safe and legal routes'. 'Safe and legal routes' are channels whereby people are granted visas to come to or stay in the UK for humanitarian reasons. Safe and legal routes include refugee resettlement programmes and also a number of nationality-specific bespoke immigration schemes.

Most of these statistics have been obtained from Home Office datasets, which are published quarterly.

This Law Centre briefing is updated regularly.

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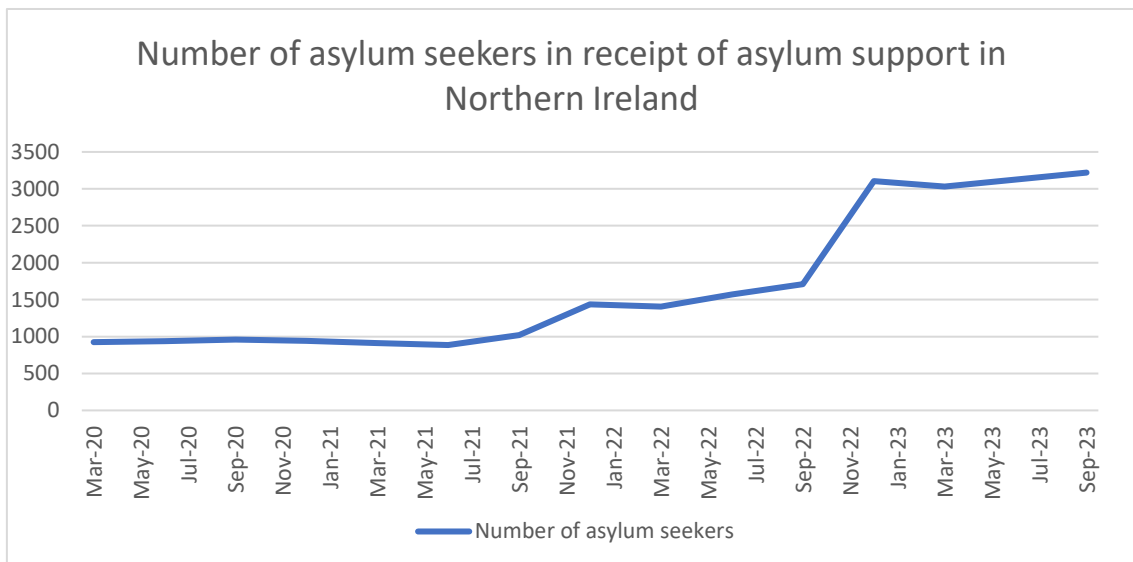
<sup>1</sup> In September 2023, there were 123,758 people receiving asylum support in UK of which 3,220 people were living in Northern Ireland i.e. 2.6%. Home Office, '[Asylum and resettlement datasets](#)' year ending September 2023. See asylum support, Asy\_D09..

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Library, '[Asylum Statistics](#)', 1 March 2023.

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR, 'Refugee Statistics 2022'. Available [here](#).

## Part A: Asylum

1. An asylum seeker is someone who has applied for international protection and is awaiting a decision on whether they will be granted refugee status.
2. In 2022, there were 74,751 asylum claims made across the UK.<sup>4</sup> The Home Office does not publish data on the number of asylum claims submitted from Northern Ireland.
3. In September 2023, there were 3,220 people receiving asylum support in Northern Ireland.<sup>5</sup> Asylum support (sometimes referred to as ‘NASS support’) is available to asylum seekers who are destitute on arrival.



4. Asylum support consists of accommodation, plus a weekly cash allowance. The cash allowance is paid on a pre-payment “Aspen” card. Note that a small number of asylum seekers cannot withdraw cash.<sup>6</sup>

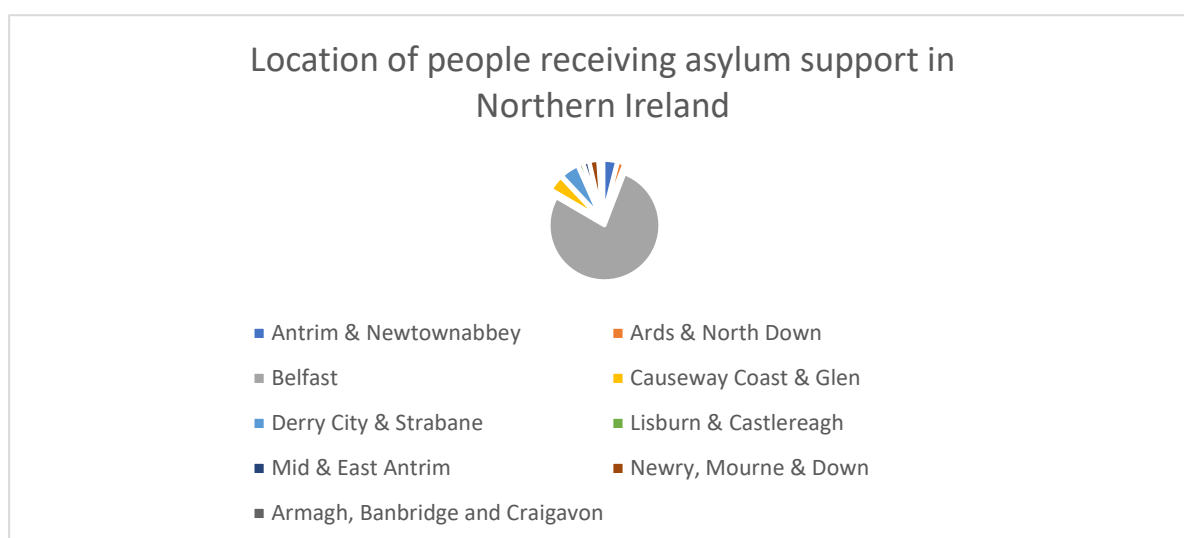
<sup>4</sup> Home Office, [‘Asylum and resettlement datasets’](#) year ending September 2023. See asylum applications, initial decisions and resettlement, Asy\_D01

<sup>5</sup> Home Office, [‘Asylum and resettlement datasets’](#) year ending September. See asylum support, Asy\_D09.

<sup>6</sup> This is known as “section 4” support and applies to some refused asylum seekers.

Category	Weekly cash allowance	Weekly rate from 8 January 2024
Standard amount	£47.39	£49.18
Amount for someone living in full-board accommodation	£9.58	£8.86
Pregnant woman	Additional £3 per week	£5.25
Baby < 1 years	Additional £5 per week <sup>7</sup>	£9.50
Toddler 1 – 3 years	Additional £3 per week	£5.25

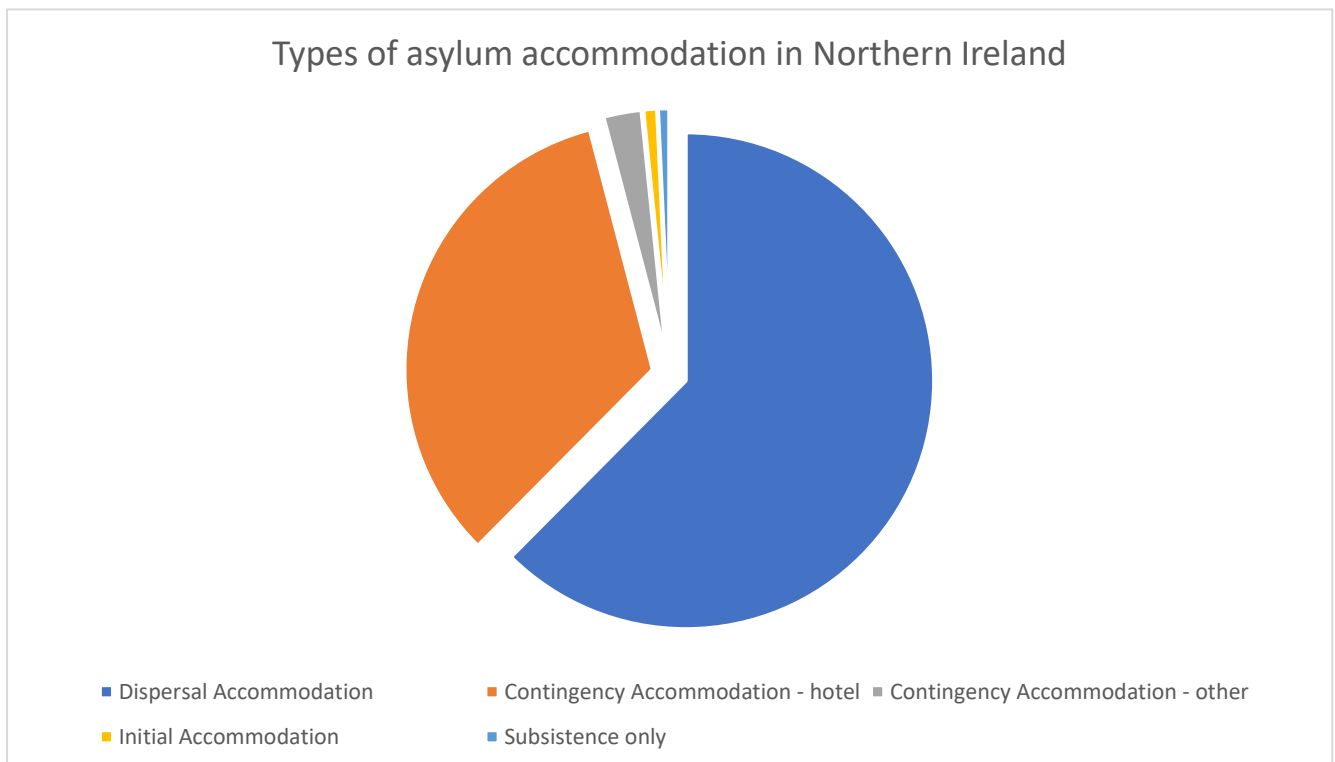
- Until relatively recently almost all asylum seekers lived in Belfast, however asylum seekers now live in different towns and cities throughout Northern Ireland including Lisburn, Newtownabbey, Bangor, Carrickfergus, Derry/Londonderry, Portstewart, Craigavon and Newcastle.
- The following chart shows in which council areas asylum seekers are living in Northern Ireland.<sup>8</sup>



<sup>7</sup> Asylum seekers can access a one-off Maternity Payment of £300. From January 8<sup>th</sup> 2024 the period is which maternity payments can be applied for will be increased to 11 weeks before the expected due date and 6 months after birth.

<sup>8</sup> Antrim & Newtownabbey, 127; Ards & North Down, 61; Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon, 36; Belfast, 2,498; Causeway Coast & Glen, 148; Derry City & Strabane, 172; Lisburn & Castlereagh, 45; Mid & East Antrim, 51; Newry, Mourne & Down, 82. Home Office, '[Asylum and resettlement datasets](#)' year ending December 2023. See resettlement by local authority, Res\_D01.

7. Asylum seekers are accommodated in different types of accommodation:<sup>9</sup>
- Dispersal accommodation:** single adult asylum seekers are accommodated in shared housing (HMOs), whereas families are accommodated in houses or flats across Northern Ireland. This is often referred to as 'Section 95' accommodation.
  - Contingency accommodation:** there are more than 20 hotels being used across Northern Ireland for this type of full-board accommodation. These hotels accommodate people under both 'Section 95' and 'Section 98' duties.
  - Initial accommodation:** newly arrived asylum seekers who present as destitute are temporarily accommodated in 'Section 98' accommodation while their application for asylum support is pending.
  - Subsistence only:** some asylum seekers receive the financial component of asylum support only. People in this category tend to live with friends or family.
8. The following chart shows how asylum seekers are accommodated in Northern Ireland.



<sup>9</sup> Dispersal Accommodation, 2,075; Contingency Accommodation (hotel), 1,086; Contingency Accommodation (other), 41; Initial Accommodation, 0; Subsistence only, 18. Home Office, '[Asylum and resettlement datasets](#)' year ending September 2023. See asylum support, Asy\_D09.

9. Asylum seekers living in Northern Ireland come from 60 countries. The 10 largest nationalities are Eritrean (527), Syrian (457), Somali (453), Sudanese (357), Iranian (235), Iraqi (196), Nigerian (130), Yemeni (130), Kuwaiti (90) and Palestinian (96).<sup>10</sup>
10. The nationalities of asylum seekers in Northern Ireland are slightly different compared to across the UK. In 2023, the 10 largest nationalities across the UK were Albanian, Iranian, Iraqi, Eritrean, Syrian, Sudanese, Pakistani, El Salvadorian, Nigerian, and Chinese.<sup>11</sup>

### A note on the statistics

The actual number of asylum seekers in Northern Ireland is likely to be slightly higher than the 3,220 cited above. This is because the Home Office statistics only record the people who are in receipt of asylum support. A small number of people are not eligible for asylum support and so are not recorded in these figures, for example, people who have their own financial means or people deemed to be ineligible for support due to being 'appeal rights exhausted'.

### About asylum seeker/refugee status

Asylum seeker status is not a visa.<sup>12</sup> If the person's asylum claim is approved, the Home Office will grant leave to remain. The majority of successful asylum seekers are granted refugee status, which is valid for five years. After five years, they must apply for Indefinite Leave to Remain (settlement). This application is free. After a further 12 months, they may be eligible to apply for British citizenship subject to eligibility criteria and a fee of £1,500 per person.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Home Office, '[Asylum and resettlement datasets](#)' year ending September 2023. See asylum support, Asy\_D09.

<sup>11</sup> These figures represent main applicants who applied through the in-country asylum system only. House of Commons Library, 'Asylum statistics', 1 March 2023. Available [here](#).

<sup>12</sup> Asylum seekers who are living in the community are deemed to have 'Immigration Bail' as per Schedule 10 to the Immigration Act 2016. In January 2018, new Home Office guidance was issued that replaces previous concepts - including temporary admission, temporary release and release on restrictions - with a single power to grant Immigration Bail. Home Office, 'Guidance: Immigration Bail' Version 15.0, 27 January 2023. Available [here](#).

<sup>13</sup> The application fee to naturalise as a British citizen is £1,500 per person. Additional fees also apply including the ceremony fee (£80) and fees for the Knowledge of Life and in the UK test (£50) and English language test (varies). The Home Office fees regularly increase each year. Home Office, 'Immigration and nationality fees' 4 October 2023. Available [here](#).

Refugee status is the most common outcome following an asylum claim, however, some asylum seekers are granted a different type of status known as 'discretionary leave to remain' or 'humanitarian protection'. These statuses are usually valid for 2.5 years and 5 years respectively. Note that the pathway to settlement is much more onerous for people granted discretionary leave to remain. To qualify for settlement, a person must have a minimum of 10 years of leave, which consists of four separate periods of 2.5 years. Each extension application costs £1,048 and Indefinite Leave to Remain costs £2,885.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Home Office, 'Immigration and nationality fees' 4 October 2023. Available [here](#).

## Part B: ‘Safe and legal’ routes

### Introduction

11. ‘Safe and legal routes’ are channels whereby people are granted visas to come to or stay in the UK for humanitarian reasons. These channels are different from asylum routes where individuals usually have to resort to irregular means to gain entry.<sup>15</sup>
12. People who come through ‘safe and legal’ routes are usually granted refugee status or other form of protection by the UK while they are abroad and *prior* to arrival. So, they arrive in the UK with status: they do not go through the UK asylum process.
13. Refugee resettlement is an example of a safe and legal route. The UN Refugee Agency (UNCHR) selects refugees for resettlement and transfers them to the UK with the agreement of the Home Office. Any offer of resettlement is contingent on security screening and provision of biometric information. Northern Ireland’s experience of refugee resettlement has been the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (see below).
14. The UK also operates several nationality-specific bespoke immigration routes. At present these apply to some Afghans, Ukrainians and people from Hong Kong. Not all these routes grant a person refugee status and the associated rights and entitlements specified in the 1951 Refugee Convention. For example, the UK Government does not refer to Ukrainians as ‘refugees’. Rather, it uses the term ‘guests’ or ‘evacuees’. The Law Centre uses the term refugees as per our understanding of international human rights law.

### Refugee family reunion

15. Some refugees arrive in the UK through refugee family reunion. If an asylum seeker is granted refugee status, their family members *may* be eligible to apply to come to the UK as refugees. Family reunion rights apply to a spouse, or partner and to any children under 18 years old if they formed a part of the family unit before the refugee fled their country. Family reunion rights were restricted by the Nationality and Borders Act 2022.

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<sup>15</sup> It is only possible to claim asylum from within the UK. However, there is no ‘asylum visa’, meaning that people cannot obtain permission to come to the UK for the purpose of claiming asylum. This is why people often must resort to irregular or clandestine means such as using false travel documents, travelling by small boat, etc.

16. In 2022, 4,473 partners and children of refugees living in the UK were granted entry to the UK through family reunion visas.<sup>16</sup> This is a UK-wide statistic: we do not have any data on the number of refugees arriving in Northern Ireland through refugee family reunion.

### Refugee community sponsorship

17. Refugees can arrive through community sponsorship. This is a way for local communities, civil society organisations, charities and faith groups to come together to host a refugee family. As far as the Law Centre is aware, only three refugee families have ever arrived in Northern Ireland through Community Sponsorship.

### Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme

18. Between 2015 – 2020, Northern Ireland welcomed 438 families comprising 1,814 individuals who arrived through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme.<sup>17</sup>

19. Under this Scheme, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) identified vulnerable people and referred them for resettlement to the UK Government and Home Office. The priority groups included refugees with medical needs, survivors of violence and torture, women and girls, children, adolescents or elderly or refugees with legal or physical protection needs or without local integration prospects.

20. The Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme is now closed.

### Syrian refugees visa

Syrian refugees were granted five years refugee status on arrival. After five years, they must apply for Indefinite Leave to Remain (settlement). This application is free. After a further 12 months, they may be eligible to apply for British citizenship subject to eligibility criteria and a fee of £1,500 per person.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Home Office, 'Immigration statistics year ending December 2022: How many people do we grant protection to?' Available [here](#).

<sup>17</sup> Department for Communities, 'Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme', last updated 20 February 2020. Available [here](#).

<sup>18</sup> The application fee to naturalise as a British citizen is £1,250 per person. Additional fees also apply including the ceremony fee (£80) and fees for the Knowledge of Life and in the UK test (£50) and English language test (varies). The Home Office fees regularly increase each year. See Home Office, 'Immigration and nationality fees' 4 October 2023. Available [here](#).



## Afghan resettlement programmes

21. There are two different schemes designed to help people fleeing Afghanistan. In April 2021, the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) was established. This is for locally employed Afghan staff who supported British efforts in Afghanistan, for example interpreters and other personnel. In January 2022, the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) was established. The UK Government describes this scheme as prioritising Afghans who assisted the UK efforts in Afghanistan and ‘stood up’ for values such as democracy, women’s rights, freedom of speech and rule of law. It also covers vulnerable people including women and girls at risk and members of minority at risk groups (including ethnic and religious minorities and LGBT+).<sup>19</sup>
22. By year end 2023, there will be 41 Afghan families comprising 173 individuals living in locations across NI.<sup>20</sup>

### About the Afghan visa

Afghans who are resettled through the ARAP or ACRS programmes receive Indefinite Leave to Remain (settlement) on arrival in the UK.<sup>21</sup> They may apply for British citizenship after 5 years in the UK subject to eligibility criteria and a fee of £1,500 per person.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Home Office, ‘Guidance: Afghan citizens resettlement scheme’ published 18 August 2021, last update 1 June 2023. Available [here](#).

<sup>20</sup> Update provided by Bryson from NI Refugee Resettlement Consortium at Refugee & Asylum Forum meeting on 12 December 2023

<sup>21</sup> Home Office, ‘Guidance: Afghan citizens resettlement scheme’ published 18 August 2021, last update 1 June 2023. Available [here](#).

<sup>22</sup> The application fee to naturalise as a British citizen is £1,500 per person. Additional fees also apply including the ceremony fee (£80) and fees for the Knowledge of Life and in the UK test (£50) and English language test (varies). The Home Office fees regularly increase each year. See Home Office, ‘Immigration and nationality fees’ 4 October 2023. Available [here](#).

## Nationality-specific immigration route: Ukraine Scheme

23. Prior to the war in Ukraine, the number of Ukrainians resident in Northern Ireland was extremely small.
24. Following the outbreak of war, the UK Government announced a new visa for Ukrainians fleeing the war: the 'Ukraine Scheme' visa.<sup>23</sup> The Ukraine Scheme visa is free and the usual biometrics fee is waived.
25. There are three different routes into the Ukraine Scheme visa. Ukrainians who are able to find a Northern Ireland-based resident who can act as a 'host' are eligible to apply to the Homes for Ukraine (Sponsorship) route. Ukrainians who come to stay with a family member who is a UK resident can apply to the Family route. Ukrainians who were living in the UK with a temporary visa when war broke out can apply to the Ukraine Extension Scheme.<sup>24</sup> An example of this latter category is Ukrainians who were working in Northern Ireland under a 6 month seasonal worker visa.
26. The Homes for Ukraine (Sponsorship) is the largest of the three routes. As of June 2023, 2,630 visas had been issued under Homes for Ukraine (Sponsorship) linked to Northern Ireland.<sup>25</sup>
27. The Law Centre estimates that there are approximately 3,000 Ukrainians in Northern Ireland with a Ukraine Scheme visa i.e. people who have obtained a visa through one of the three routes. There are also 12 Ukrainians who have claimed asylum and who are therefore included within the asylum data.

### A note on the statistics

The Home Office acknowledges that the Northern Ireland dataset is not comprehensive.<sup>26</sup> This is because many Ukrainians arrive in Northern Ireland from the Republic of Ireland and so are not recorded in the official 'arrivals' data.

<sup>23</sup> Family members are also eligible to apply to the Ukraine Scheme and this includes family members with non Ukrainian nationality.

<sup>24</sup> Ukrainians who receive a six month passport stamp on arrival in UK may also be eligible to apply to the Ukraine Extension Scheme.

<sup>25</sup> Home Office, 'Transparency data: Ukraine Family Scheme, Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme and Ukraine Extension Scheme visa data' updated 12 December 2023. Available [here](#).

<sup>26</sup> Home Office, 'Homes for Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme: visa data by age and sex of applicant', updated 25 May 2023. Available [here](#).

## About the Ukraine Scheme visa

The Ukraine Scheme visa is valid for three years only. At the time of writing, the UK Government has not outlined whether the visa can be extended. There is no pathway to settlement at present for Ukrainians with this visa.

## Nationality-specific immigration route: British National (Overseas) Hong Kong scheme

28. The British National (Overseas) Hong Kong visa scheme commenced in January 2021.<sup>27</sup> This scheme was devised following the Chinese government's imposition of the National Security Law in Hong Kong in July 2020, which the UK views to be in breach of international law.

29. Applicants can apply for a BN(O) visa from inside or outside the UK.

30. Unlike all the other visas referred to in this paper, the BN(O) visa is not free. There is a visa fee of £180 for a 2 ½ year visa and £250 for a 5 year visa. Applicants must also pay the Immigration Health Surcharge, which is £624 per year.<sup>28</sup> In addition to paying these fees upfront, applicants must be able to evidence enough money to pay for accommodation and support costs for them and their family for at least 6 months. Applicants must also pay a biometric fee of £19.20.<sup>29</sup>

31. Again, unlike other visas, the BN(O) visa does not afford access to public funds. This means that visa-holders cannot claim means-tested social security benefits such as Universal Credit.

32. Across the UK, 129,493 BN(O) visas have been granted in the first two years of the scheme opening.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Law Centre, 'Information briefing: British National Oversea visa', February 2021. Available [here](#).

<sup>28</sup> Gov.UK Immigration health Surcharge. Available [here](#).

<sup>29</sup> The Home Office fees regularly increase each year. See Home Office, 'Immigration and nationality fees' 4 October 2023.

<sup>30</sup> There have been a total of 129,415 grants of out of country BN(O) visas made between 31 January 2021 and 31 December 2022. 105,200 people have arrived in the UK on the scheme since it began. And a total of 24,293 grants of in country BN(O) visas made between 31 January 2021 and 31 December 2022. Home Office, 'National Statistics: How many people come to the UK each year?' Published 23 February 2023. Available [here](#).

33. There is no published data relating to BN(O) visas and Northern Ireland. It is estimated that there are 2,000 people in Northern Ireland who have fled from Hong Kong.<sup>31</sup>

### About the BN(O) visa

This visa is subject to a number of costs (see above) and is subject to the 'No Recourse to Public Funds' rule. After five years, a BN(O) visa holder can apply for Indefinite Leave to Remain (settlement). This application costs £2,885 for each applicant. After a further 12 months, visa holders may be eligible to apply for British citizenship subject to eligibility criteria and a fee of £1,500 per person.<sup>32</sup>

### About Law Centre NI

Law Centre NI transforms lives through law. We have worked in immigration law since 1988. The Law Centre's Migration Justice Project provides specialist legal services to individuals and support to advice organisations across Northern Ireland on asylum and trafficking, including to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

The Law Centre convenes Northern Ireland's Refugee and Asylum Forum (a network of organisations that provide support services to asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland).

We are also members of Belfast City Council's Migrant Forum, the Department of Justice's NGO Engagement Group on Human Trafficking and the Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group.

For further information about this briefing please contact:

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<sup>31</sup> This is the estimate of community organisation 'Hong Kongers in NI'.

<sup>32</sup> The application fee to naturalise as a British citizen is £1,250 per person. Additional fees also apply including the ceremony fee (£80) and fees for the Knowledge of Life and in the UK test (£50) and English language test (varies). The Home Office fees regularly increase each year. See Home Office, 'Immigration and nationality fees' 4 October 2023.