

Northern Ireland refugee statistics

April 2024

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 2.5% of all the people in the UK who are seeking sanctuary.¹ The UK ranks 18th in Europe for the asylum applications per head of population.² Worldwide, the large majority (69%) of the world's refugees live in neighbouring countries, which tend to be low and middle income countries.³ It is Global South countries – not Europe – which are hosting most of the world's refugees.⁴

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.

¹ In December 2023, there were 111,132 people receiving asylum support in UK of which 2831 people were living in Northern Ireland, i.e. 2.55%. Home Office, '[Immigration system statistics data tables](#)' [last updated 29 February 2024]. See [Asylum seekers in receipt of support detailed datasets, year ending December 2023](#), Asy_D09.

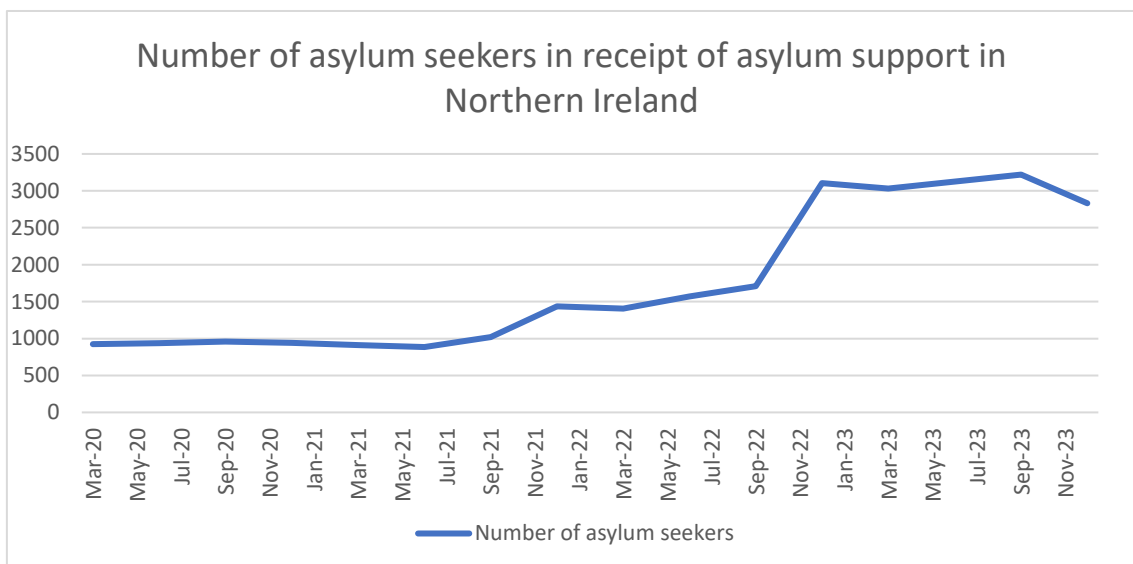
² House of Commons Library, '[Asylum Statistics](#)', 1 March 2024 (according to annual data for 2022).

³ UNHCR, '[Refugee Data Finder](#)' [last updated 24 October 2023].

⁴ 75% of refugees live in low and middle income countries. UNHCR, '[Refugee Data Finder](#)' [last updated 24 October 2023].

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 2023, there were 67,337 asylum claims made across the UK.⁵ The Home Office does not publish data on the number of asylum claims submitted from Northern Ireland.
3. In December 2023, there were 2,831 people receiving asylum support in Northern Ireland.⁶ Asylum support is available to asylum seekers who are destitute on arrival.⁷



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.⁸

⁵ Home Office, ‘[Immigration system statistics data tables](#)’ [last updated 29 February 2024]. See [Asylum and resettlement summary tables, year ending December 2023](#), Asy_01a.

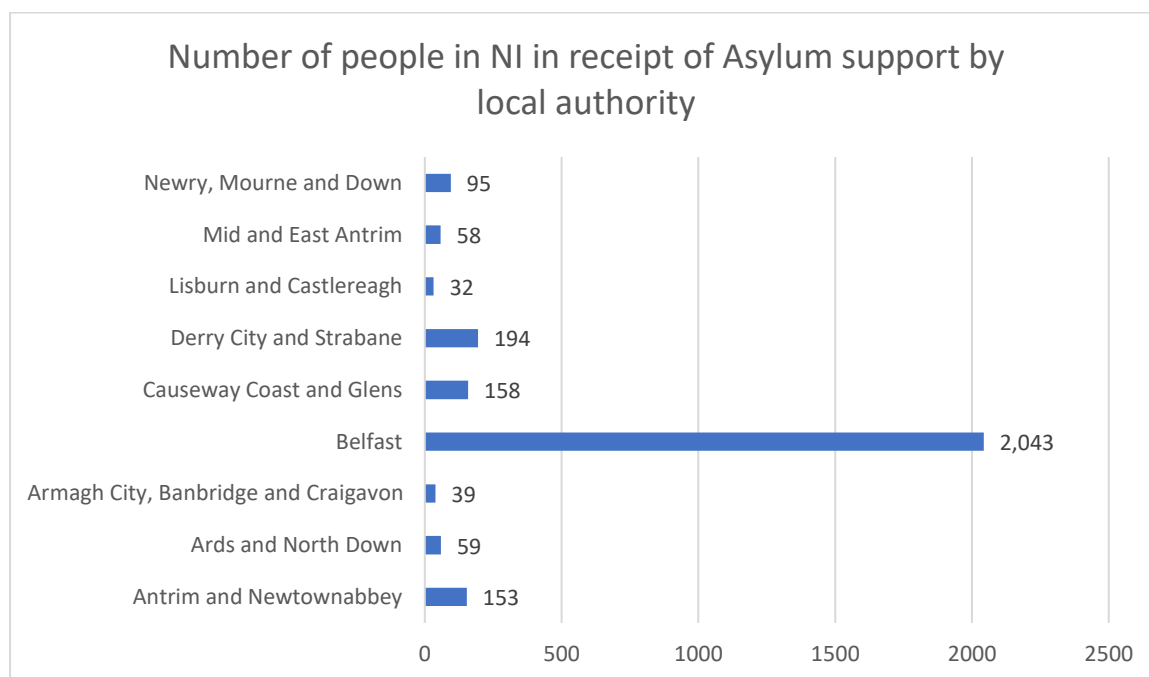
⁶ Home Office, ‘[Immigration system statistics data tables](#)’ [last updated 29 February 2024].. See [Asylum seekers in receipt of support detailed datasets, year ending December 2023](#), Asy_D09.

⁷ Asylum support was previously referred to as ‘NASS’ support.

⁸ This is known as “section 4” support and applies to some refused asylum seekers.

Category ⁹	Weekly rate
Standard amount	£49.18
Amount for someone living in full-board accommodation	£8.86
Pregnant woman	£5.25
Baby < 1 years ¹⁰	£9.50
Toddler 1 – 3 years	£5.25

5. 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.
6. The following chart shows in which council areas asylum seekers are living in Northern Ireland as of December 2023.¹¹



7. Asylum seekers are accommodated in different types of accommodation:
 - a. **Dispersal accommodation:** single adult asylum seekers are accommodated in shared housing (HMOs), whereas families are accommodated in houses or

⁹ Asylum support rates are available [here](#).

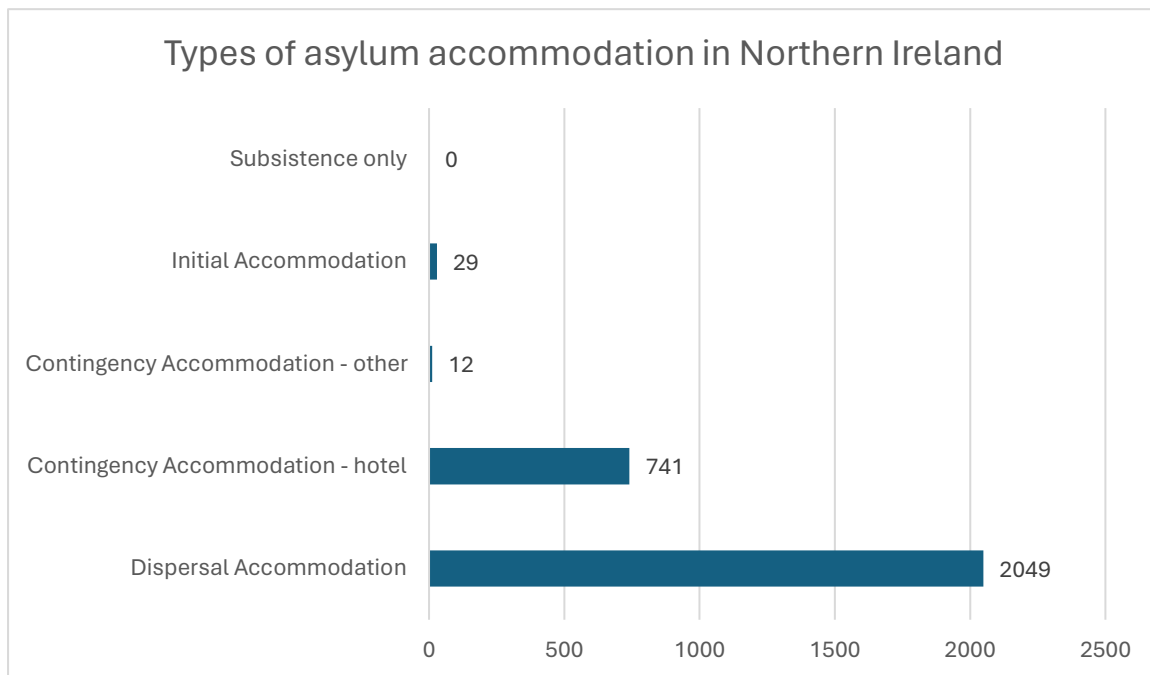
¹⁰ Asylum seekers can access a one-off Maternity Payment of £300 and can apply between 11 weeks before the expected due date and 6 months after birth.

¹¹ There are no people in support of asylum support in either Omagh and Fermanagh or Mid Ulster council areas. Home Office, '[Immigration system statistics data tables](#)' [last updated 29 February 2024]. See [Asylum seekers in receipt of support by local authority detailed datasets, year ending December 2023](#), Asy_D11.

flats across Northern Ireland. This is often referred to as ‘Section 95’ accommodation.

- b. **Contingency accommodation:** there are at least 15 hotels being used across Northern Ireland for this type of full-board accommodation, though this number appears to be decreasing. These hotels accommodate people under both ‘Section 95’ and ‘Section 98’ duties.
- c. **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.
- d. **Subsistence only:** some asylum seekers receive the financial component of asylum support only. There are no people in Northern Ireland living in subsistence only accommodation as of December 2023.

8. The following chart shows *how* asylum seekers are accommodated in Northern Ireland.¹²



9. Asylum seekers living in Northern Ireland come from 66 countries.¹³ The 10 largest nationalities are Eritrean (420), Somali (403), Syrian (352), Sudanese (288), Iranian (243), Iraqi (186), Nigerian (119), Palestinian (86), Yemeni (86) and Stateless (76).¹⁴

¹² Dispersal Accommodation, 2,049; Contingency Accommodation (hotel), 741; Contingency Accommodation (other), 12; Initial Accommodation, 29; Subsistence only, 0. Home Office, '[Immigration system statistics data tables](#)' [last updated: 29 February 2024]. See [Asylum seekers in receipt of support detailed datasets, year ending December 2023](#), Asy_D09.

¹³ Excluding those recorded as “other and unknown”, “refugee” or “stateless”.

¹⁴ Home Office, '[Immigration system statistics data tables](#)' [last updated: 29 February 2024]. See [Asylum seekers in receipt of support detailed datasets, year ending December 2023](#), Data - Asy_D09.

10. The nationalities of asylum seekers in Northern Ireland are different compared to across the UK. In 2023, the 10 largest nationalities across the UK were Afghanistan, Iran, India, Pakistan, Turkey, Eritrea, Bangladesh, Albania, Syria and Sudan.¹⁵

A note on the statistics

The actual number of asylum seekers in Northern Ireland is likely to be slightly higher than the 2,831 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.¹⁶ If the person's asylum claim is approved, the Home Office will grant permission to stay. 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, which is also known as 'settlement'. This application is free. After a further 12 months, they may be eligible to apply for British citizenship.

Refugee status is the most common outcome following an asylum claim, however, some asylum seekers are granted a different type of status known as 'humanitarian protection' or 'discretionary leave to remain'. These statuses are usually valid for 5 years and 2.5 years respectively.

Note that different entitlements / restrictions apply to the different statuses. For example, the pathway to settlement is much more onerous for people granted discretionary leave to remain.¹⁷

¹⁵ These figures represent main applicants who applied through the in-country asylum system only. Home Office, 'immigration system statistics data tables: [Asylum applications, initial decisions and resettlement detailed datasets, year ending December 2023](#) (29 February 2024).

¹⁶ 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 19.0, 18 March 2024.

¹⁷ 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. These applications are expensive.

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.¹⁸
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.
16. In 2023, 9,764 partners and children of refugees living in the UK were granted entry to the UK through family reunion visas.¹⁹ This is a UK-wide statistic: we do not have

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ Home Office, '[Immigration system statistics data tables](#)' [last updated: 29 February 2024]. See table [Family reunion visa grants detailed datasets, year ending December 2023](#) [family-reunion-visa-grants-datasets-dec-2023.xlsx \(live.com\)](#), Fam_D01

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.²⁰

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 closed in March 2021.²¹ This means that people fleeing Syria now arrive through the usual asylum or family reunion process.

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 application fee.

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.²² In January 2022, the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) was established. The UK Government describes this

²⁰ Department for Communities, '[Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme](#)' [last updated 20 February 2020].

²¹ UNCHR, '[The UK's Syria Resettlement Programme: Looking Back, and Ahead](#)' [published 23 March 2021].

²² Ministry of Defence, '[Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy: further information on eligibility criteria, offer details and how to apply](#)' [last updated 18 September 2023]

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+).

There are three pathways under the ACRS:

- a. Pathway 1: vulnerable and at-risk individuals who were evacuated to the UK, as well as those who were called forward for evacuation but were unable to board flights.
- b. Pathway 2: vulnerable refugees who have fled Afghanistan and have been referred to the scheme by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).
- c. Pathway 3: at-risk individuals who supported the UK and international community effort in Afghanistan, as well as vulnerable people.²³

22. As of 31 March 2024, there were 49 Afghan families comprising 204 individuals living in locations across Northern Ireland.²⁴

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.²⁵ They may apply for British citizenship after 5 years in the UK. Note that Afghans who arrive under Pathways 1 and 3 are not recognised as refugees, meaning that they are not eligible for refugee protections such as Family Reunion.²⁶

Nationality-specific immigration route: Ukraine Scheme

23. Prior to the war in Ukraine, the number of Ukrainians resident in Northern Ireland was extremely small. Following the outbreak of war, the UK Government announced a new visa for Ukrainians fleeing the war: the ‘Ukraine Scheme’ visa, which opened in March 2022. The Ukraine Scheme visa is free and the usual biometrics fee is waived.

24. There are now two different routes into the Ukraine Scheme visa.²⁷ 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 were living in

²³ Home Office, ‘[Guidance: Afghan citizens resettlement scheme](#)’ [published 18 August 2021, last updated 14 March 2024].

²⁴ Update provided by Bryson from NI Refugee Resettlement Consortium via email on 8 March 2024.

²⁵ Home Office, ‘[Guidance: Afghan citizens resettlement scheme](#)’ [published 18 August 2021, last updated 14 March 2024].

²⁶ ‘Individuals brought to the UK under the ARAP or the ACRS Pathways 1 and 3 do not have protection status, and therefore are not eligible to sponsor family members under the refugee family reunion rules’. See: Home Office, ‘[Family reunion: for individuals with protection status in the UK, Version 10.0](#)’ (17 July 2023).

²⁷ Initially there were three routes in to the Ukraine Scheme however, the ‘Family’ route was closed on 19 February 2024. Gov.UK, ‘[Guidance: Apply for a Ukraine Family Scheme visa](#)’ [published 4 March 2022, last updated 19 February 2024].

the UK with a temporary visa when war broke out can apply to the Ukraine Extension Scheme. An example of this latter category is Ukrainians who were working in Northern Ireland under a 6 month seasonal worker visa.

25. As of March 2024, just over 3,000 Ukraine Scheme visas have been issued to people arriving in Northern Ireland.²⁸ The large majority of people received visas through the Sponsorship route, with smaller numbers arriving through the (now defunct) Family route and the Ukraine Extension Scheme. Northern Ireland is also hosting 12 Ukrainians within the asylum system.²⁹ Overall, Northern Ireland hosts approximately 1.2% of Ukrainians who have fled to the UK following the war.³⁰

A note on the statistics

The Home Office acknowledges that the Northern Ireland dataset is not comprehensive.³¹ This is because many Ukrainians arrive in Northern Ireland from the Republic of Ireland and so are not recorded in the official 'arrivals' data.

About the Ukraine Scheme visa

When the Ukraine Scheme was first announced, visas were valid for 3 years. In February 2024, the Government announced that any new applicants will be granted 18 months. Further, there will be a process whereby all Ukraine Scheme visas can be extended by a further 18 months.³² At the time of writing, this visa does not afford a pathway to settlement.

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

26. The British National (Overseas) Hong Kong visa scheme commenced on 31 January 2021.³³ 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. Applicants can apply for a BN(O) visa from inside or outside the UK.

²⁸ Information provided by The Executive Office to the Law Centre via email on 8 April 2024.

²⁹ Home Office, '[Immigration system statistics data tables](#)' [last updated: 29 February 2024]. See [Asylum seekers in receipt of support detailed datasets, year ending December 2023](#), Data - Asy_D09.

³⁰ Across the UK, 255,100 Ukraine Scheme visas have been issued. Home Office, '[Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme: Visa data by country, upper and lower tier local authority - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)' [last updated 4 April 2024].

³¹ Home Office, 'Homes for Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme: Visa data by age and sex of applicant', [last updated 29 February 2023]. See [spreadsheet](#), 'Notes' tab.

³² <https://www.lawcentreni.org/news/ukraine-scheme-update-feb2024/> [last updated 26 February 2024]

³³ Home Office, '[Policy paper British National \(Overseas\)](#)' [last updated 13 October 2023].

27. Unlike all the other visas referred to in this paper, the BN(O) visa is not free. Applicants must also pay the Immigration Health Surcharge and biometric fee. 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.
28. 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.
29. Across the UK, 191,158 BN(O) visas (95.5% of all applications) have been granted in the first three years of the scheme opening.³⁴
30. There is no published data relating to BN(O) visas and Northern Ireland. Based on UK figures, it is estimated that 500-1,000 people from Hong Kong have arrived in Northern Ireland through this route.³⁵ There are also six individuals from Hong Kong receiving asylum support in Northern Ireland.³⁶

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). After a further 12 months, visa holders may be eligible to apply for British citizenship subject to eligibility criteria and application fee.

³⁴ There have been a total of 157,576 grants of out of country BN(O) visas made between 31 January 2021 and 31 December 2022. 140,300 people have arrived in the UK on the scheme since it began, 35,000 of whom arrived in 2023. A total of 33,582 grants of in-country BN(O) extension visas have been made between 31 January 2021 and 31 December 2023, of which 9,300 were granted in 2023. National statistics, '[Immigration system statistics, year ending December 2023](#)': '[Safe and legal \(humanitarian\) routes to the UK](#)' [published 29 February 2024, data as of December 2023].

³⁵ Information provided by The Executive Office to the Law Centre via email on 8 April 2024.

³⁶ Home Office, '[Immigration system statistics data tables](#)' [last updated: 29 February 2024]. See [Asylum seekers in receipt of support detailed datasets, year ending December 2023](#), Data - Asy_D09.

Immigration application costs

31. While some immigration applications are free for people seeking protection, some categories of people are required to pay fees.

Visa application ³⁷	Cost	
Application for Further Leave to Remain	£1,048 for 2 ½ year visa	
Application for Indefinite Leave to Remain	£2,885	
Naturalise as British citizen	Application fee	£1,250 per person
	Ceremony fee	£80
	Knowledge of language and life in the UK test ³⁸	£50
	Additional fees may also apply	
BN(O) visa	£180 (2 ½ years) £250 (5 years)	
Immigration Health Surcharge ³⁹	£776-£1035 p.a. (£1,940-£2,587.50 for a 2.5-year visa)	
Biometric fee	£19.20	

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. For further information about this briefing please contact:

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³⁷ Home Office, '[Immigration and nationality fees' 4 October 2023](#)' [updated 31 January 2024].

³⁸ Gov.UK, '[Life in the UK Test](#)'.

³⁹ Gov.UK, '[Pay for UK healthcare as part of your immigration application](#)'.