

## Northern Ireland refugee statistics

December 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 2.41% of all the people in the UK who are seeking sanctuary.<sup>1</sup> When compared with EU countries, the UK is below average for asylum applications per head of population, ranking 17<sup>th</sup> among EU27 countries plus the UK on this measure.<sup>2</sup> Worldwide, the large majority (69%) 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 – that are hosting most of the world's refugees.<sup>4</sup>

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 2024, there were 109,024 people receiving asylum support in UK of which 2,632 people were living in Northern Ireland, i.e. 2.41%. Home Office, '[Immigration system statistics data tables](#)' [last updated 28 November 2024]. See [Asylum seekers in receipt of support detailed datasets, year ending September 2024](#) Asy\_D09.

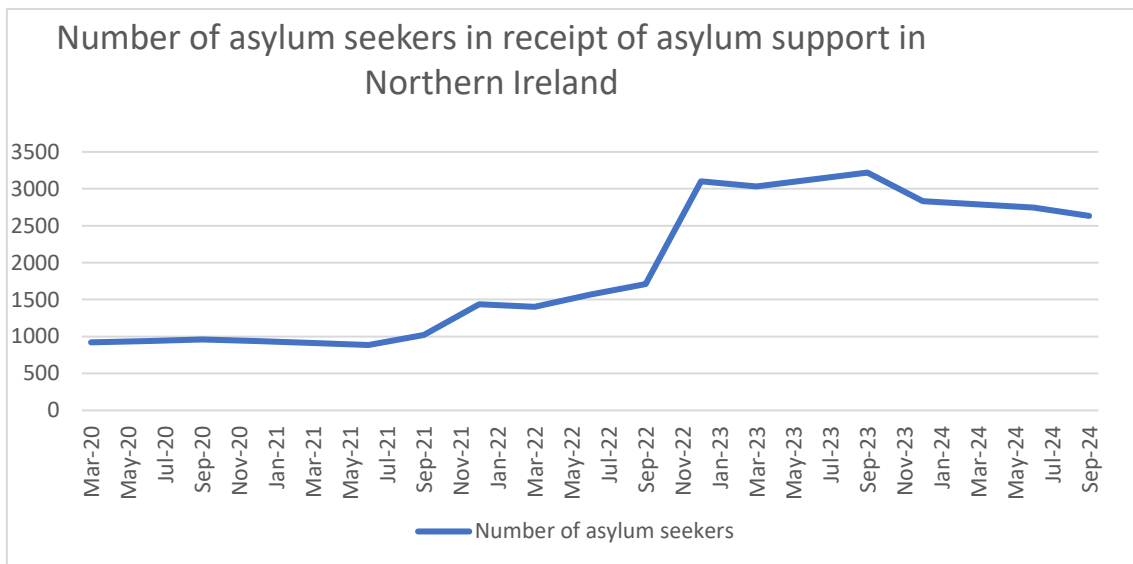
<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Library, '[Asylum Statistics](#)', 10 September 2024 (according to annual data for 2023).

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR, '[Refugee Data Finder](#)' [last updated 8 October 2024].

<sup>4</sup> 71% of refugees live in low and middle income countries. UNHCR, '[Refugee Data Finder](#)' [last updated 8 October 2024].

## 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 the year up to September 2024, there were 77,066 asylum claims made across the UK.<sup>5</sup> The Home Office does not publish data on the number of asylum claims submitted in Northern Ireland.
3. In March 2024, there were 2,632 people receiving asylum support in Northern



Ireland.<sup>6</sup> Asylum support is available to asylum seekers who are destitute on arrival.<sup>7</sup>

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>8</sup>

Category <sup>9</sup>	Weekly rate per person
Standard amount	£49.18
Amount for someone living in full-board accommodation	£8.86
Pregnant woman	£5.25

<sup>5</sup> Home Office, ‘[Immigration system statistics data tables](#)’ [last updated 28 November 2024]. See [Asylum and resettlement summary tables, year ending September 2024](#)

<sup>6</sup> Home Office, ‘[Immigration system statistics data tables](#)’ [last updated 28 November 2024]. See [Asylum seekers in receipt of support detailed datasets, year ending September 2024](#) Asy\_D09.

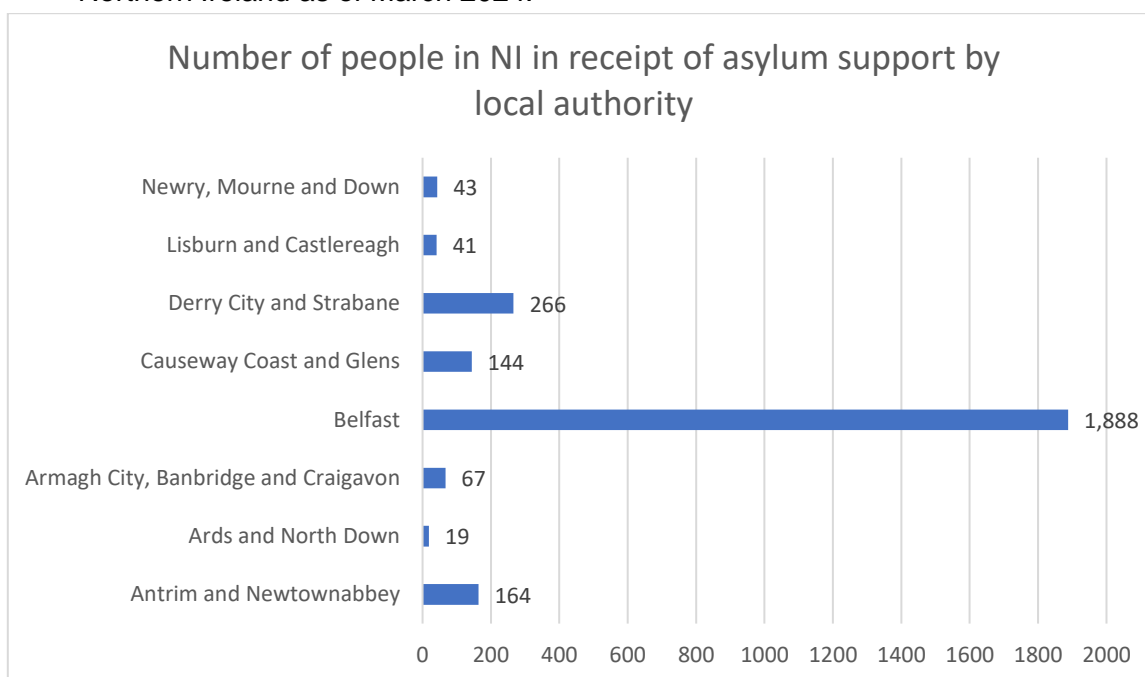
<sup>7</sup> Asylum support was previously referred to as ‘NASS’ support.

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

<sup>9</sup> Asylum support rates are available [here](#).

Baby < 1 years <sup>10</sup>	£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, Derry/Londonderry, Portstewart, Craigavon and Newcastle.
6. The following chart shows in which council areas asylum seekers are living in Northern Ireland as of March 2024.<sup>11</sup>



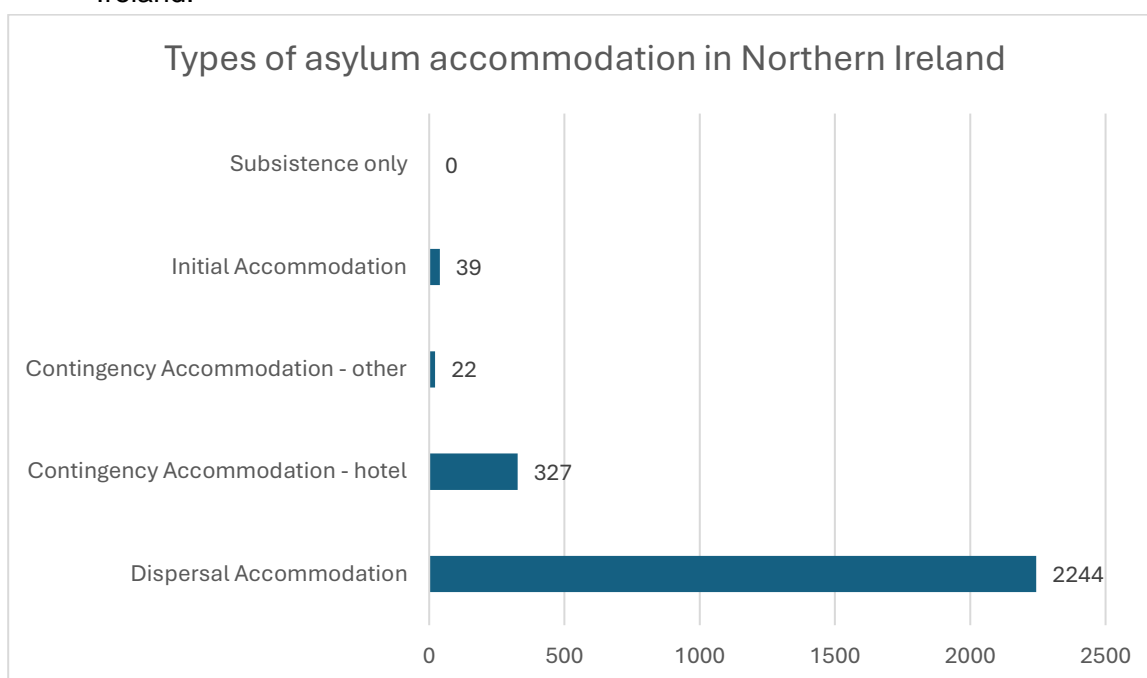
7. Asylum seekers are accommodated in different types of accommodation:
  - a. **Dispersal accommodation:** single adult asylum seekers are accommodated in shared housing (HMOs), whereas families are accommodated in houses or flats across Northern Ireland. This is often referred to as ‘Section 95’ accommodation.
  - 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.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> There are no people in support of asylum support in Omagh and Fermanagh, Mid Ulster or Mid and East Antrim council areas. Home Office, ‘[Immigration system statistics data tables](#)’ [last updated 28 November 2024]. See [Asylum seekers in receipt of support by local authority detailed datasets, year ending September 2024](#) Asy-\_D11.

- 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 2024.

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



9. Asylum seekers living in Northern Ireland come from at least 68 countries.<sup>13</sup> The 10 largest nationalities include Somali (433), Eritrea (358), Syrian (324), Sudanese (292), Iranian (190), Iraqi (137), Nigerian (100), Palestinian (70), Yemeni (70), and Kuwaiti (59).<sup>14</sup>

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, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Turkey, Iraq, Eritrea, Albania and Syria.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Dispersal Accommodation, 2,244; Contingency Accommodation (hotel), 327; Contingency Accommodation (other), 22; Initial Accommodation, 39; Subsistence only, 0. Home Office, '[Immigration system statistics data tables](#)' [last updated: 28 November 2024]. See [Asylum seekers in receipt of support detailed datasets, year ending September 2024 Asy\\_D09](#).

<sup>13</sup> Excluding those recorded as “other and unknown”, “refugee” or “stateless”.

<sup>14</sup> Home Office, '[Immigration system statistics data tables](#)' [last updated: 28 November 2024, Data - Asy\_D09.2024]. See [asylum seekers in receipt of support detailed datasets, year ending September 2024](#), Data - Asy\_D09. This excludes those recorded as “Other and Unknown” of whom there were 80 in the year up to September 2024.

<sup>15</sup> These figures represent main applicants who applied through the in-country asylum system only. See: Migration Observatory, '[Asylum and refugee resettlement in the UK](#)', published 1 July 2024.

### A note on the statistics

The actual number of asylum seekers in Northern Ireland is likely to be slightly higher than the 2,632 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>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</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 20.0, 23 October 2024.

<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</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 route to protection. 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 immediate 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. As of September 2024, 5,328 family members of refugees living in the UK have been granted entry to the UK through family reunion visas, over half of whom were children

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<sup>18</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. The Refugee Convention protects a person from being prosecuted for irregular entry, provided they make their claim for asylum at the earliest opportunity.

under 18.<sup>19</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>20</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 closed in March 2021.<sup>21</sup> 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

<sup>19</sup> Home Office, '[Immigration system statistics data tables](#)' [last updated: 28 November 2024]. See table [Family reunion visa grants detailed datasets, year ending September 2024](#) Fam\_D01

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

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



example interpreters and other personnel.<sup>22</sup> 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 LGBTQ+). 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 UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR).
- c. **Pathway 3:** at-risk individuals who supported the UK and international community effort in Afghanistan, as well as vulnerable people.<sup>23</sup>

22. As of November 2024, there were 68 Afghan families comprising 300 individuals living in locations across Northern Ireland.<sup>24</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>25</sup> 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, or for Refugee Travel Documents.<sup>26</sup>

### 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. Initially there were three routes in to the Ukraine Scheme: Homes For Ukraine Scheme, Ukraine Extension Scheme and Ukraine Family Scheme. The Family

<sup>22</sup> Ministry of Defence, ‘[Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy: further information on eligibility criteria, offer details and how to apply](#)’ [last updated 20 November 2024]

<sup>23</sup> Home Office, ‘[Guidance: Afghan citizens resettlement scheme](#)’ [published 18 August 2021, last updated 16 August 2024].

<sup>24</sup> Update provided by Bryson from NI Refugee Resettlement Consortium via email on 28 November 2024.

<sup>25</sup> Home Office, ‘[Guidance: Afghan citizens resettlement scheme](#)’ [published 18 August 2021, last updated 16 August 2024].

<sup>26</sup> ‘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).



Scheme, used by Ukrainians to bring their family members to the UK, was closed on 19 February 2024.<sup>27</sup> The Extension Scheme, used by Ukrainians who were already living in the UK with a temporary visa when war broke out, closed for new applications on 16 May 2024, with an exception for babies born in the UK to Ukrainian parents.<sup>28</sup>

25. There is now only one route into the Ukraine Scheme visa: Homes For Ukraine. Ukrainians who are able to find a Northern Ireland-based resident<sup>29</sup> who can act as a 'host' are eligible to apply to the Homes for Ukraine (Sponsorship) route.
26. As of 28 November 2024, 3,397 Ukraine Scheme visas have been issued to people arriving in Northern Ireland.<sup>30</sup> The large majority of people received visas through the Sponsorship route, with smaller numbers arriving through the (now defunct) Family route and the (now defunct) Ukraine Extension Scheme. Northern Ireland is also hosting 15 Ukrainians within the asylum system.<sup>31</sup> Overall, Northern Ireland hosts approximately 1.5% of Ukrainians who have fled to the UK following the war.<sup>32</sup>

#### A note on the statistics

The Home Office acknowledges that the Northern Ireland dataset is not comprehensive.<sup>33</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.

#### About the Ukraine Scheme visa

Ukraine Scheme visas were initially valid for 3 years. The Ukraine Permission Extension (UPE) scheme will open in February 2025 which provides a further 18 months extension.<sup>34</sup> At the time of writing, this visa does not afford a pathway to settlement.

<sup>27</sup> Gov.UK, '[Guidance: Apply for a Ukraine Family Scheme visa](#)' [published 4 March 2022, last updated 26 November 2024].

<sup>28</sup> Babies born in the UK to Ukraine Scheme visa holders can apply for status through the Extension Scheme. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/apply-to-stay-in-the-uk-under-the-ukraine-extension-scheme> [published 3 May 2022, last updated 5 December 2024].

<sup>29</sup> Hosts must be a British or Irish citizen, or be 'settled in the UK' (which means having the right to live in the UK permanently) and be able to provide accommodation for a minimum of 6 months. [Gov. UK, 'Guidance: Apply for a visa under the Homes for Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme'](#) [published 18 March 2022, last updated 26 November 2024]

<sup>30</sup> Information provided by The Executive Office to the Law Centre via email on 28 November 2024.

<sup>31</sup> Home Office, '[Immigration system statistics data tables](#)' [last updated: 28 November 2024]. See [Asylum seekers in receipt of support detailed datasets, year ending September 2024](#), Data - Asy\_D09.

<sup>32</sup> Across the UK, 192,749 Ukraine Scheme visas have been issued. Gov.uk, '[Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme: Visa data by country, upper and lower tier local authority - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)' [last updated 28 November 2024].

<sup>33</sup> Home Office, 'Homes for Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme: Visa data by age and sex of applicant', [last updated 28 November 2024]. See [spreadsheet](#), 'Notes' tab.

<sup>34</sup> See: Law Centre NI, 'Ukraine Scheme: what happens after the 3-year visa ends?' Available [here](#) [last updated 26 February 2024]; Home Office guidance, 'Applying to the Ukraine Permission Extension scheme' [published 26 November 2024, last updated 5 December 2024] available [here](#).

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

27. The British National (Overseas) Hong Kong visa scheme commenced on 31 January 2021.<sup>35</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. Applicants can apply for a BN(O) visa from inside or outside the UK.
28. 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.
29. 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.
30. Across the UK, 201,877 BN(O) visas (95.74% of all applications) have been granted since the scheme has opened.<sup>36</sup>
31. 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.<sup>37</sup> There are also three individuals from Hong Kong receiving asylum support in Northern Ireland.<sup>38</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). After a further 12 months, visa holders may be eligible to apply for British citizenship subject to eligibility criteria and application fee.

<sup>35</sup> Home Office, '[Policy paper British National \(Overseas\)](#)' [last updated 13 October 2023].

<sup>36</sup> There have been a total of 174,307 grants of out of country BN(O) visa applications made between 31 January 2021 and end of September 2024, of which 20,338 have been granted in the year ending September 2024 (out of 21,454). 158,400 people (rounded) have arrived in the UK on the scheme since it began, 22,500 of whom have arrived in the year up to September 2024.

A total of 43,646 in-country extension applications (rounded) have been made between 31 January 2021 and the end of September 2024 (with 41,305 granted), with 10,975 in the year ending September 2024 (of which 10,697 were granted).

National statistics, '[Immigration system statistics quarterly release - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)' [Immigration system statistics, year ending September 2024 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#) [published 28 November 2024]. [How many people come to the UK via safe and legal \(humanitarian\) routes?](#) [published 28 November 2024].

<sup>37</sup> Information provided by The Executive Office to the Law Centre via email on 8 April 2024.

<sup>38</sup> Home Office, '[Immigration system statistics data tables](#)' [last updated: 28 November 2024]. See [Asylum seekers in receipt of support detailed datasets, year ending September 2024](#) Data - Asy\_D09.

## Immigration application costs

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

Visa application <sup>39</sup>	Cost	
Application for Limited Leave to Remain	£1,048 for 2 ½ year visa	
Application for Indefinite Leave to Remain	£2,885	
Naturalise as British citizen	Application fee	£1,500 per person
	Ceremony fee	£80
	Life in the UK test <sup>40</sup>	£50
	Additional fees may also apply	
BN(O) visa	£180 – £250 (2 ½ - 5 years visa)	
Immigration Health Surcharge <sup>41</sup>	£1,035 per annum for most adult applicants. <sup>42</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 and information resources for advice organisations across Northern Ireland on asylum and trafficking, including to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. <https://www.lawcentreni.org/migration-justice-project/>

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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<sup>39</sup> Home Office, '[Immigration and nationality fees](#)' 4 October 2023' [last updated 11 December 2024].

<sup>40</sup> Gov.UK, '[Life in the UK Test](#)'.

<sup>41</sup> Gov.UK, '[Pay for UK healthcare as part of your immigration application](#)'.