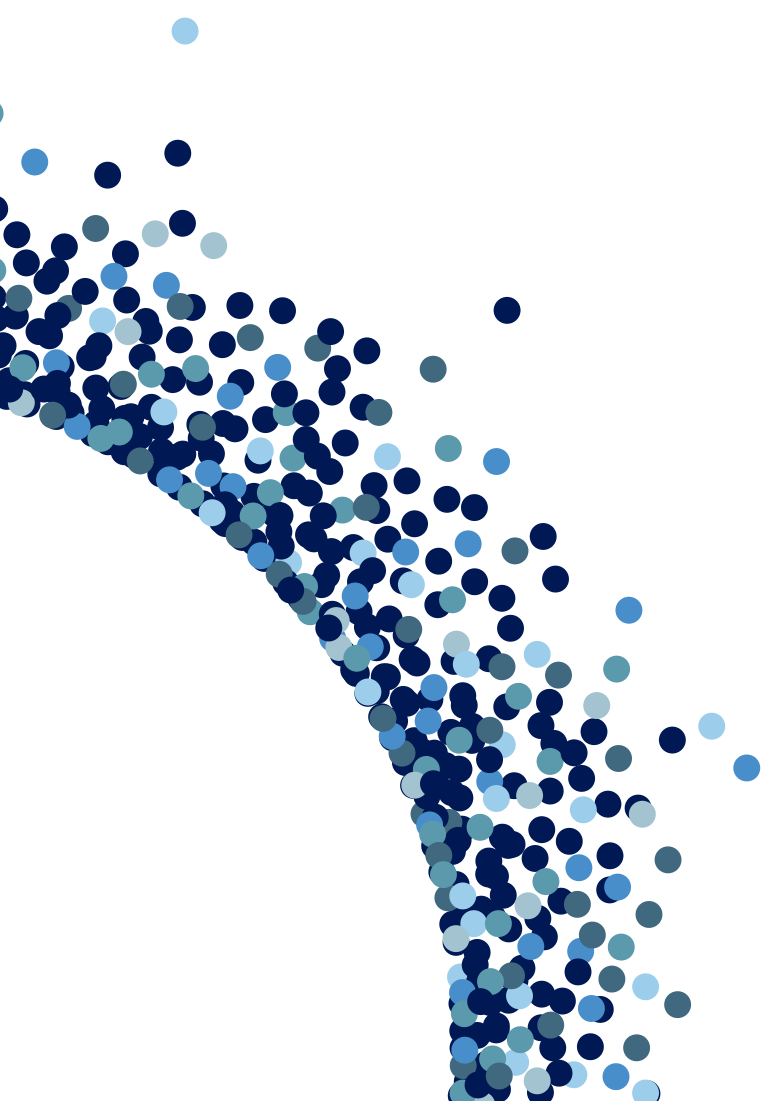




BRIEFING

Asylum and refugee resettlement in the UK



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This briefing examines asylum and refugee resettlement in the UK. It presents data on the number and characteristics of asylum seekers and resettled refugees, the success rate of asylum applications, and the impact of COVID-19.

Key Points

People who originally came to the UK to seek asylum made up an estimated 5% of the UK's foreign-born population in 2019, and 0.6% of the UK's total resident population.

COVID-19 substantially reduced asylum seeking and refugee resettlement in the UK in 2020 – though in 2021, asylum seeking was at its highest level since 2003.

The success rate of asylum applications at initial decision increased sharply from 2018 to 2021.

The share of asylum applications that received an initial decision within six months fell from 87% in Q2 2014 to 6% in Q2 2021.

On 31 December 2021, around 101,000 people were awaiting an initial Home Office decision on their asylum application.

The distribution of asylum seekers and resettled refugees is highly uneven across the UK.

In 2021, the top five most common countries of nationality of people who applied for asylum in the UK were Iran, Iraq, Eritrea, Albania and Syria.

Of all refugees resettled in the UK from January 2010 to December 2021, around 70% were Syrian citizens.

When compared against EU+ countries, in 2021 the UK ranked 7th in the absolute number of people to whom it gave protection, including asylum seekers and resettled refugees.

In 2021, around 6,100 people were issued with a refugee family reunion visa, and around 2,300 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children were granted asylum or other leave.

The financial cost of operating the UK's asylum system reached £1.4bn in 2020.

Despite nominal increases, *in real terms* the asylum support payment level in 2022 was 27% lower than in 2000.

Understanding the policy

Asylum is the protection that is granted by a nation-state to a person who has fled their country to escape serious threat to their life or liberty. People granted this protection, which arises out of the United Nations 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (the "Refugee Convention"), are called refugees. The word refugee is also used more generally to refer to anyone who has fled their country to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster, even if they have not been granted protection under the Refugee Convention.

The Refugee Convention defines a refugee as a person who, “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country”. An *asylum seeker* (or asylum applicant) is a person who has applied for recognition as a refugee under the Refugee Convention, to which over 140 nations are signatories (UNHCR, 2020).

There is no law that says asylum seekers must make their asylum claim in the first safe country they arrive in after leaving their country of origin. However, under an EU law called the Dublin III Regulation, asylum seekers could in theory be transferred to the first EU member state in which they arrived after leaving their origin country. Because of Brexit, the UK is no longer a part of the Dublin arrangements, but has introduced new laws on “inadmissibility” to bar people from claiming asylum in the UK if they had an earlier presence in or connection to a safe third country.

To claim asylum in the UK, a person *must be in the UK*. It is not possible to apply from outside the country, and there is no asylum visa to enable people to travel to the UK legally to apply for asylum. Therefore, for citizens who do not have visa-free travel to the UK, to claim asylum in the UK, they must enter either irregularly, such as by small boat, lorry, or by using false documents, or on a visa for some other purpose, such as tourism or study. Applicants will not be granted asylum if the government believes they represent a danger to the UK ([UK Immigration Rules, paragraph 334](#)).

There are four possible outcomes of an asylum application. First, an applicant can be recognised as a ‘Group 1’ refugee (see below) and granted asylum with five years’ leave (i.e., permission to stay in the UK), after which they may apply, free, for permanent residence. Second, an applicant can be recognised as a ‘Group 2’ refugee, and given lesser rights: 2.5 years’ leave with the opportunity to apply for permanent residence after 10 years. Third, the applicant is judged not to qualify for refugee status but granted permission to stay in the UK for humanitarian or other reasons. These statuses include humanitarian protection (HP); discretionary leave (DL); leave under family or private life rules; unaccompanied asylum-seeking child (UASC) leave. Fourth, the asylum claim can be refused. If a claim is refused, the applicant can appeal against the initial decision, and if the appeal is successful be granted permission to stay.

All applications request protection for a ‘main applicant’, and some include requests for protection for the main applicant’s dependent family members as well, specifically: their spouse, civil partner, or unmarried partner, and any children under 18, but not dependent parents. The dependants on an application receive the same outcome as the main applicant ([Immigration Rules, Paragraph 349](#)).

The Home Office states that asylum in the UK should be sought at the first available opportunity, on arrival at a port of entry. Those who do not claim asylum on arrival can instead apply in person for asylum at the Asylum Intake Unit in London. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the government has temporarily [introduced](#) additional locations where asylum claims can be made: Glasgow, Belfast, Cardiff, Liverpool, Leeds, and Solihull.

Right to work and benefits

Asylum seekers are not generally permitted to work in the UK while their claim is being considered. If they are destitute, they can apply for free accommodation, as well as asylum support, which is set at £40.85 a week, equivalent to £5.84 per day. The Home Office may grant an asylum applicant permission to work only if both (1) their asylum claim has been outstanding for more than 12 months through no fault of the applicant, and (2) the job is on the [Shortage Occupation List](#) (which includes a selection of skilled jobs). Campaign groups have argued that asylum seekers and their adult dependants should be able to work in any job after having waited six months for a decision on their claim or further submission (for example, Refugee Action, 2020). Asylum seekers are, however, permitted to study while awaiting a decision on their asylum claim. Other countries have more liberal policies governing asylum seekers’ right to work. In Australia, Canada, and Sweden, asylum seekers can work immediately, while in Portugal they can work after one month, Germany three months, Belgium four months, and the US after six months (Migration Advisory Committee, 2021, p. 32).

Dispersal

Since 2000, the UK has operated a policy of dispersal across the UK of asylum applicants who require accommodation, to prevent the London and the South East being overburdened by the obligation of supporting asylum seekers. Asylum applicants have no say in where they are sent to live while awaiting a decision on their asylum claim. Instead, to determine where asylum seekers are accommodated, negotiations take place between local authorities, the Home Office, and third party contractors who are responsible for securing private rental accommodation.

Refugee family reunion

The UK allows an adult granted refugee status or humanitarian protection to be joined in the UK by their spouse or partner, and any of their children who are under 18, if they formed a part of the family unit before the refugee fled their country. However, parents, grandparents, siblings, or children who are 18 or over are not eligible to join under the refugee family reunion route. Nor are unaccompanied minors who have been granted refugee status generally permitted to be joined by their parents. Campaign groups have argued for a broader definition of who qualifies as a 'family member' for the purposes of refugee family reunion (see, for example, Oxfam International, 2018). There are also reduced family reunion rights available to some refugees and all recipients of humanitarian protection who apply for asylum after 28 June 2022.

Refugee resettlement

Refugee resettlement is separate from the asylum process. In the asylum process, people must apply for asylum whilst in the UK. By contrast, it is not possible to apply for refugee resettlement. Instead, refugees are selected by the UN for resettlement, and transferred to the UK with the agreement of the Home Office, where they receive refugee status on arrival. Prior to 2021, the UK operated four resettlement schemes. These were suspended in March 2020 due to COVID-19, and recommenced in December 2020 (UK Visas and Immigration, 2021). The largest of these was the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS), which began in 2014 and aimed to resettle 20,000 Syrian refugees by 2020. This scheme was later expanded to people of any nationality fleeing the Syrian conflict. The Vulnerable Children Resettlement Scheme (VCRS) aimed to resettle 3,000 children from the Middle East and North Africa by 2020. Two further schemes, the Mandate Scheme and Gateway Protection Programme (GPP), are for refugees from anywhere in the world, with the former for those who have a close family member in the UK who is willing to accommodate them (for more information on the UK's resettlement schemes see Sturge, 2022). The government has since combined the VPRS, VCRS, and GPP into the UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS), which opened in Q1 2021, along with the Community Sponsorship Scheme. January 2022 also saw the commencement of the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS; see below). Therefore, since early 2021, four resettlement schemes have been in operation: the UKRS, Mandate Scheme, Community Sponsorship Scheme, and ACRS.

Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS)

After the withdrawal from Afghanistan of British and US armed forces and the rise of the Taliban, the UK government introduced a resettlement scheme for Afghans based on the Syrian model (for more detail see, [Afghan refugees in the UK](#)). The scheme aims to resettle 20,000 people in three years: 5,000 in its first year of operation, and the remainder over the following two years (according to a [statement](#) made in Parliament on 13 September by the Minister for Afghan Resettlement, Victoria Atkins). The scheme opened on 6 January 2022, but no data are currently available on the number of people who have been granted protection in the UK under this scheme.

Hong Kong British National (Overseas) visa

On 31 January 2021, the UK opened a new route for Hong Kong British National (Overseas) citizens (BNOs) and their close family members (see The Migration Observatory's Q&A: [The new Hong Kong British National \(Overseas\) visa](#)). Under the new route, an estimated 5.4 million Hong Kong residents will be eligible to move to the UK and eventually become British citizens. This route to citizenship is sometimes [presented](#) as an asylum route. However, it is not an asylum route, and the visa does not confer an asylum-related status. Instead, it is applied for like any other visa, and its applicants must pay immigration fees: for the visa, the immigration health surcharge, and for any further application for settlements or citizenship. From when the route opened until 31 March 2022, a total of 123,400 people had applied for the visa (comprising main applicants and dependants).

Ukraine

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the UK created two new visa schemes for people fleeing the war. The Ukraine Family Scheme allows Ukrainian citizens and their close family members to apply for a visa, free, to come to the UK to join their relatives, who must be either British citizens or have permanent residence. The Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme, also known as Homes for Ukraine, allows Ukrainian nationals and their immediate family members to come to the UK if they have a named sponsor, which could be an individual, community group, local authority, or businesses. For more information on these Ukraine schemes, see our briefing, [Migration and the Ukraine crisis](#).

The Nationality and Borders Act 2022

In March 2021, the UK government published a [policy statement](#) for its *New Plan for Immigration*, which outlined an overhaul of the UK's "broken" asylum system. A central aim of the policy was to tackle people crossing the English Channel in small boats from France. A major part of this policy was introduced via the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 (see our forthcoming commentary, *The Nationality and Borders Act 2022*), which introduced a suite of policies, including penalising certain refugees for their method of entering the UK, tougher criminal sanctions for irregular entry to the UK, and a scheme to send people seeking asylum in the UK to Rwanda (see our Q&A: [The UK's policy to send asylum seekers to Rwanda](#)). Currently, there are no data available on the impacts of the new Act. Future updates of this briefing will include relevant data.

Understanding the evidence

In this briefing, references to the EU or EU+ exclude the UK, but include Switzerland and the three additional EEA countries, Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway.

Data on foreign-born UK residents' main reason for moving to the UK come from the Labour Force Survey (LFS), the largest official household survey in the UK. Only one 'main' reason for migration is recorded, though in practice people may have more than one reason for moving. The data reflect self-reported reasons and will not necessarily match people's legal immigration status. LFS data in this briefing is for 2019 rather than later years, because of problems in data reliability during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Data on the number of asylum applicants and grants of asylum-related leave come from administrative databases of the Home Office. In this briefing, where we refer to asylum seekers or asylum applicants (i.e., the number of people who claim asylum), we include both main applicants and dependants. 'Asylum applications' refers to main applicants only. When this briefing discusses "grants", it is typically with respect to grants of "asylum-related protection", which comprises grants of asylum (refugee status) as well as any other grant of permission to stay, such as humanitarian protection or discretionary leave.

To calculate the success rate of asylum claims, we cannot simply divide the number of positive initial decision in any given year by the total number of applications received that year. This is because many asylum decisions in any given year will relate to claims made in earlier years, and because refused claims can be appealed. Therefore, to examine the success rate of asylum claims, this briefing analyses Home Office data on the 'final outcomes' of applications. These data provide the outcomes (as of May 2020) of a 'cohort' of applications (i.e., all those submitted in the same year), taking into account the results of appeals to the First-tier Tribunal (though not higher courts). In recognising that initial refusals can be overturned on appeal, these data provide a better indication of success rates than data on initial decisions. These estimates of asylum claim success rates exclude withdrawn applications and those that are still pending, because these applications have not received a decision. Because final success rates vary from year to year, in part because cohorts have different numbers of pending applications, this briefing analyses together the applications of three cohorts from 2016 to 2018 inclusive, which reduces the effect of biases due to some cohorts containing applications that, for whatever reason, take longer to process. Data for 2019 are not included because large numbers of applications submitted in that year are still awaiting a decision, the outcomes of which may change the success rate.

The only available data on the location of asylum seekers awaiting a decision on their claim is for those who are receiving government support, specifically, ‘Section 4’ support, which is for those whose asylum application has been finally determined as refused but they are destitute and there are reasons that temporarily prevent them from leaving the UK; and ‘Section 95’ support, which is for asylum seekers who have an asylum claim or appeal outstanding and failed asylum seekers who had children in their household when their appeal rights were exhausted. This support includes the provision of accommodation, money for subsistence, or both. These data are broken down by region and local authority. The data on asylum seekers’ location presented in this briefing include all those on Section 4 or Section 95 support and not just those in dispersed accommodation. This support is given only to asylum seekers who are destitute and so these data may not reflect the location of *all* asylum seekers. Local authority data for those in receipt of Sections 4 and 95 support are based on the registered address of the asylum seeker, which may not be the location at which the individual regularly resides. For resettled refugees, location data are provided for those resettled under the VPRS and VCRS and refer to the refugees’ initial receiving local authority, which they may later leave.

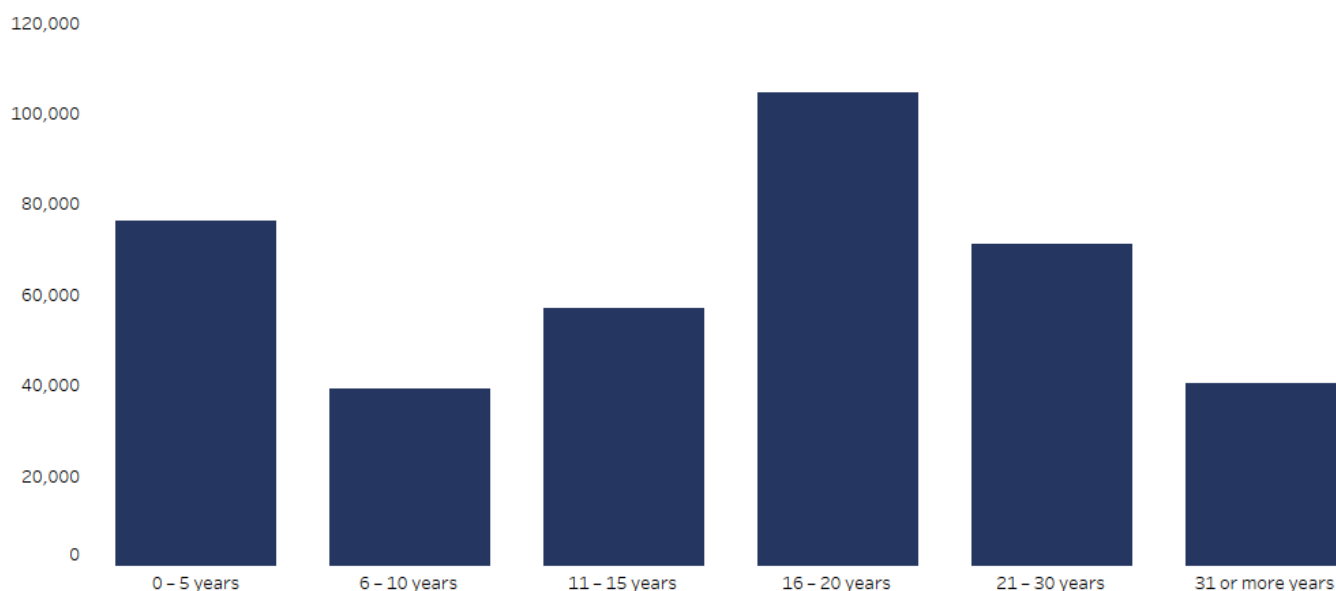
People who originally came to the UK to seek asylum made up an estimated 5% of the UK’s foreign-born population in 2019, and 0.6% of the UK’s total resident population

An estimated 388,000 foreign-born people living in the UK in 2019 originally came to the UK to seek asylum, according to Migration Observatory analysis of the Labour Force Survey. This made up 5% of the UK’s foreign-born population in 2019 of 9.48 million, and 0.6% of the UK’s total 2019 resident population of around 67 million. Of these, 56% had lived in the UK for sixteen years or more. (Figure 1).

Figure 1

How long have people who initially came to the UK to seek asylum lived in the country for?

Estimates of the foreign-born population as at 2019



To Embed charts from this briefing: click the share icon and insert the Embed Code as HTML code into your webpage.

Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the Labour Force Survey, 2019 (weighted average of four quarters).

Note: These data refer to participants in the survey who said that their main reason for migrating was to seek asylum, with only one main reason recorded.

Excludes an estimated 91,000 foreign-born residents (representing 1% of the foreign-born population) who did not give information about their year of arrival to the UK.

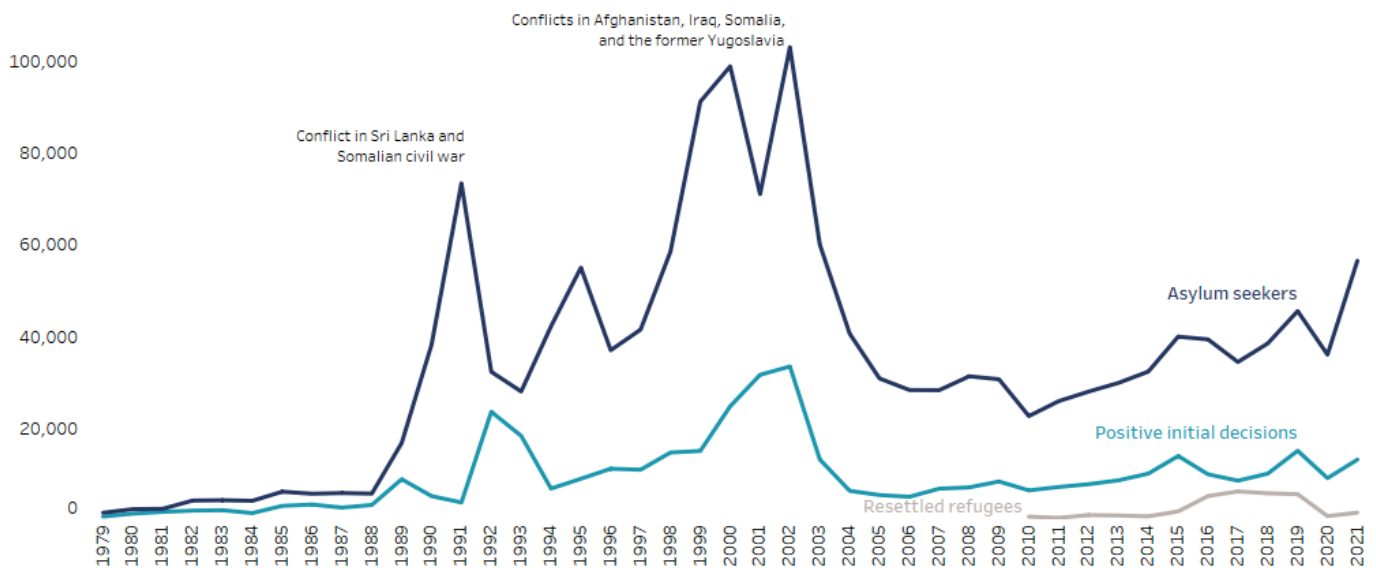


These data include those granted asylum or another type of permission to stay, or who remained in the UK without legal immigration status. They partly reflect the increase in asylum applications and grants of asylum-related leave during the late 1990s and early 2000s (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Number of people who claimed asylum, positive initial decisions, and refugees resettled, per year, UK, 1979 to 2021

Main applicants and dependants; positive decisions are grants of asylum or other permission to stay



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics: for asylum seekers and positive initial decisions, 1979–2000: Table as_02 (March 2019), and for 2001–2021, Table Asy_D02. For resettled refugees: Table Asy_D02.

Note: 'Other leave' comprises grants of humanitarian protection, discretionary leave, leave under family or private life rules, UASC leave, leave outside the rules, Calais leave, and exceptional leave to remain. Grants are at initial decision; the number of people granted some form of asylum-related leave will be higher if appeals are taken into account. Resettlement data are for refugees resettled under the VPRS, VCRS, Gateway Protection Programme, and Mandate...



Changes over time in the number of people seeking asylum in the UK are driven in large part by geopolitical events, since asylum seekers come mainly from countries embroiled in political and military conflicts (see Crawley, 2010). For example, the spike in people who came to the UK to seek asylum from 1998 to 2002 were mainly nationals of Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and the former Yugoslavia, which were then sites of war.

In 2019, long-term immigration to the UK was estimated to be around 680,000. Of these 680,000, around 42,000 were estimated to be asylum seekers or resettled refugees, which is equivalent to around 6% of all immigrants that year (Office for National Statistics, 2020).

An analysis of the composition of grants over time by nationality can be found in a House of Commons Library briefing on [Asylum statistics](#) (Sturge, 2022, p. 17).

COVID-19 substantially reduced asylum seeking and refugee resettlement in the UK in 2020 – though in 2021, asylum seeking was at its highest level since 2003

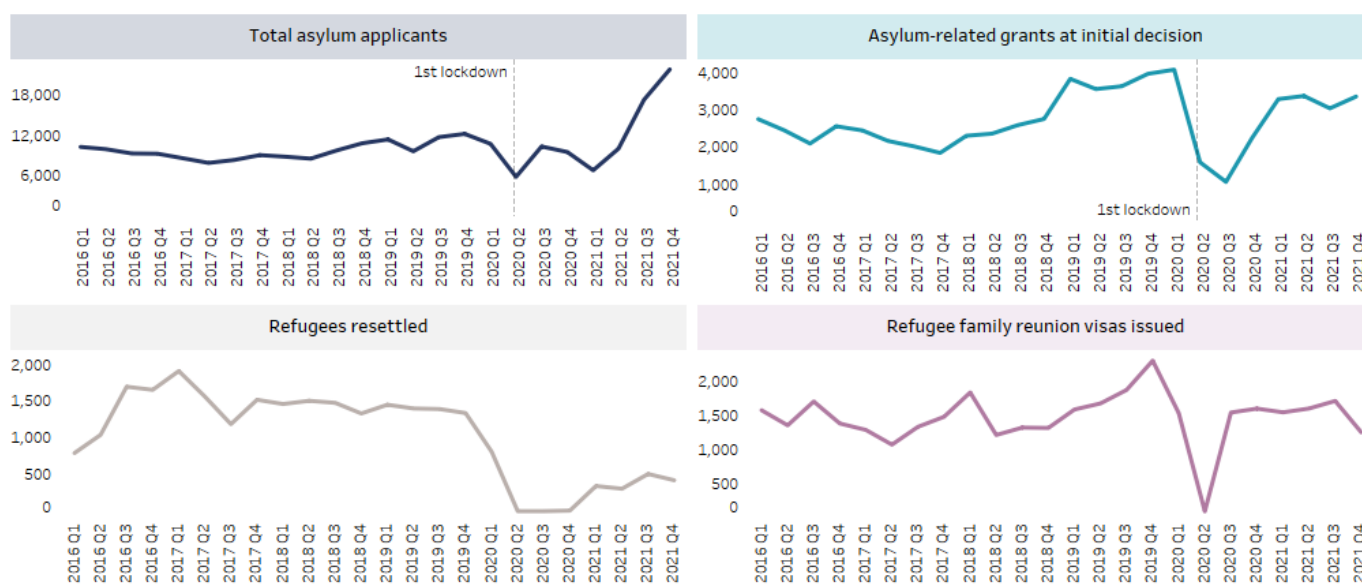
The COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns had a substantial impact on all major aspects of asylum seeking in the UK, and on the asylum system (Figure 3). The number of people seeking asylum in 2020 was 21% lower than in 2019. Asylum-related grants were down 40%. Refugee resettlement, which was paused in Q2 and Q3 2020, fell in 2020 by 85% from 2019, reaching its lowest annual level since 2014.

In 2021, asylum applications and grants exceeded pre-pandemic levels, while refugee resettlement did not bounce back. The number of asylum applicants in 2021 reached around 56,500, the greatest number since 2003 when around 60,000 people claimed asylum in the UK.

Figure 3

The impact of COVID-19 on UK refugee resettlement and asylum, 2016 to 2021

For number of asylum applicants, asylum grants, refugees resettled, and family reunion visas issued, per quarter



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Tables Asy_D01 (for asylum applicants), Asy_D02 (for grants and refugees resettled), and Fam_D01 (for refugee family reunion visas issued).

Note: Asylum applicants and grants are for main applicants and dependants. Asylum-related grants comprises grants of asylum or other leave at initial decision and therefore do not take into account the results of appeals, which increase the number of grants.



The Home Office [does not routinely publish](#) breakdowns of asylum claims by claimants’ method of arrival in the UK. However, according to data from the Home Office released under a freedom of information request from the Migration Observatory, of the 39,134 people who made it to the UK via small boat from 2018 to 2021 inclusive, 92% claimed asylum (as of 26 May 2022; for more information on small boat arrivals see the forthcoming Migration Observatory briefing, [People crossing the English Channel in small boats](#)).

The success rate of asylum applications at initial decision increased sharply from 2018 to 2021

In 2021, the share of asylum applications (main applicants, excluding dependants) receiving a grant at initial decision rose to a record-high of 72% (with 28% being refused), which is much higher than in previous years. In 2018, the initial decision grant rate was 33% (Figure 4). The Home Office credits the increase predominantly due to a 98% fall in the number of people being subject to “third country refusals” (3,300 people in 2020 to 50 in 2021). A third country refusal refers to the UK determining that it is not the country responsible for considering a person’s asylum claim because they have a connection to a safe third country. These refusals were typically processed under the Dublin system, which the UK left on 1 January 2021. The reduction in third country refusals will have increased the overall success rate of asylum claims. But there are other factors driving the change. One is a change in the composition of applicants. For example, in recent years, there has been an increase in nationals, whose asylum application success rate is higher than the average, such as Iranians.

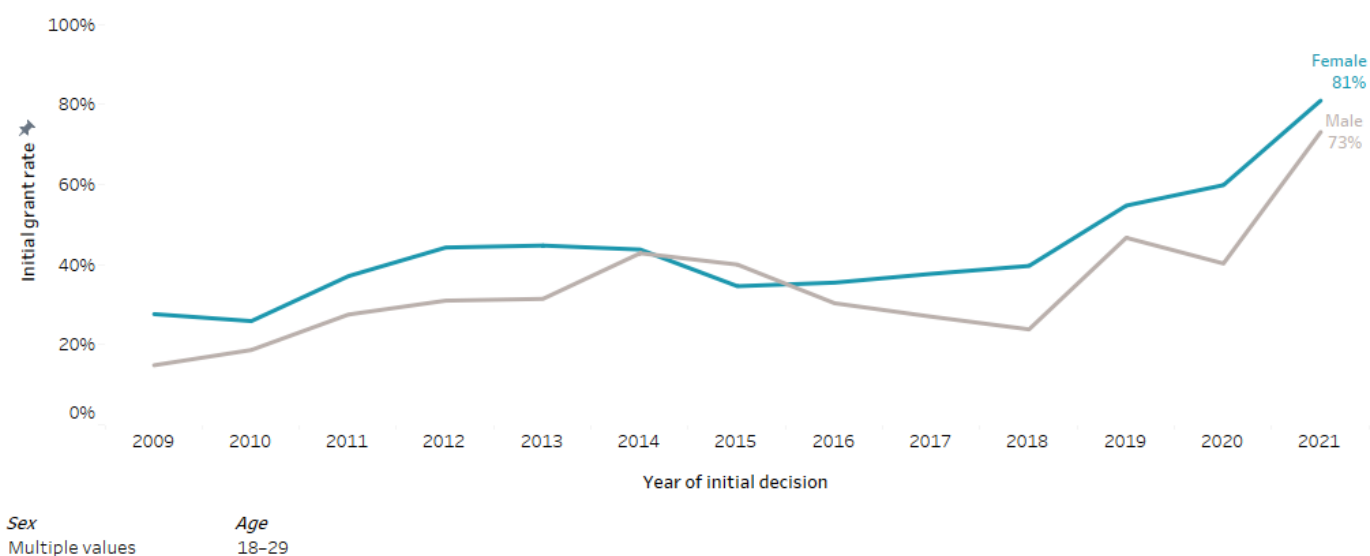
In a recent [speech](#), Prime Minister Boris Johnson stated that “around seven out of 10 of those arriving in small boats last year were men under 40, paying people smugglers to queue jump and taking up our capacity to help genuine women and child refugees”. The implication that asylum seekers being young and male means they are less likely to be ‘genuine’ refugees has been echoed by the Home Secretary, Priti Patel, who [stated](#) to Parliament in November 2021 that, “in the last 12 months alone, 70% of the individuals who have come to our country illegally via small boats

are single men, who are effectively economic migrants. They are not genuine asylum seekers. These are the ones who are elbowing out the women and children, who are at risk and fleeing persecution.” The available evidence does not support the claim that young, male asylum seekers are predominantly economic migrants rather than genuine refugees. Although there are no data currently available on whether male asylum applicants in the UK are single or not, in 2021, of all initial decisions made by the Home Office on the asylum claims of male main applicants aged 18–29, 73% were successful (i.e., they resulted in a grant of asylum or other permission to stay). This is 8 percentage points lower than female applicants of the same age (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Share of asylum seekers receiving a grant of asylum-related permission to stay at initial decision, per year, by age and sex, 2009 to 2021

Main applicants only



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Table Asy_D02.

Notes: 'All ages' includes a small number of people of "Unknown" age, and the sex category 'All' includes people of 'Unknown sex'.



An important factor that increases the share of female refugees in the UK is that following grants of asylum, many young male refugees will go on to be joined by their female partners through refugee family reunion. From 2011 to 2021, 80% of adults receiving refugee family reunion visas were women. As a result, after accounting for family reunion, the overall gender balance of those granted protection evens out over time. Women made up 45% of adults granted asylum-related status or refugee family reunion between 2011 and 2021 (Table 1). Note that these figures exclude asylum applicants who are initially refused but are successful on appeal, as the immigration statistics do not include a gender breakdown for this group.

Table 1: Adult asylum grants, resettlement and refugee family reunion by gender, 2011-2021, annual average

	Men	Women	% men
Successful asylum applicants (initial decision only)	4,734	2,433	66%
Refugee family reunion visas granted	444	1,742	20%
Asylum initial grants + refugee family reunion	5,178	4,175	55%
Resettled refugees	623	707	47%

Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office immigration statistics, Table Asy_D02 and Fam_D01. Note: Excludes people under age 18. Successful asylum applications are those who received a grant of asylum or other permission to stay resulting from an asylum applications. Grants of asylum include main applicants and dependants.

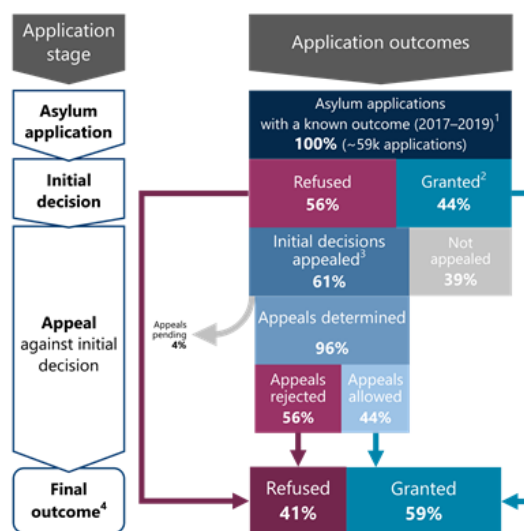
All initial decisions by the Home Office on asylum claims can be appealed against, which ultimately increases the share of successful claims. Of all applications (main applicants) received in the three-year period from 2017 to 2019 with a known outcome as of May 2021 (this excludes withdrawn and pending applications), 44% resulted in a grant of asylum or other leave at initial decision.

Over this period, 61% of initial decisions were appealed. Most appeals are against refusals, but some appeals are against positive decisions to seek a stronger form of permission to stay, such as refugee status rather than humanitarian protection (Home Office, 2022a). Of these appeals with a known outcome (excluding pending and withdrawn appeals), 44% were successful. This increased the grant rate from 44% at initial Home Office decision to 59% after appeal to the First-tier tribunal (Figure 5).

Figure 5

What share of asylum applications are ultimately successful?

Main applicants, excluding dependants; for applications submitted in 2017 to 2019 inclusive with a known outcome as at May 2021..



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Outcome analysis of asylum applications, Asy_D04.

Note: (1) Because the estimated grant rates are based on cases with a known outcome only, they will change with time as more cases reach initial decision and a final outcome after appeal. (2) 'Granted' means granted asylum or another form of leave. Rates are estimates because interpretation is required in a small number of cases, which is made by Home Office computer code. (3) Appeals against initial decisions include appeals against positive initial decisions except those granting full refugee status (i.e., grants of asylum). Although most appeals are against rejections, a small number are against positive decisions (except grants of asylum), to seek a stronger form of leave. (4) 'Final outcome' takes into account appeals to the First-tier Tribunal, but not higher courts.



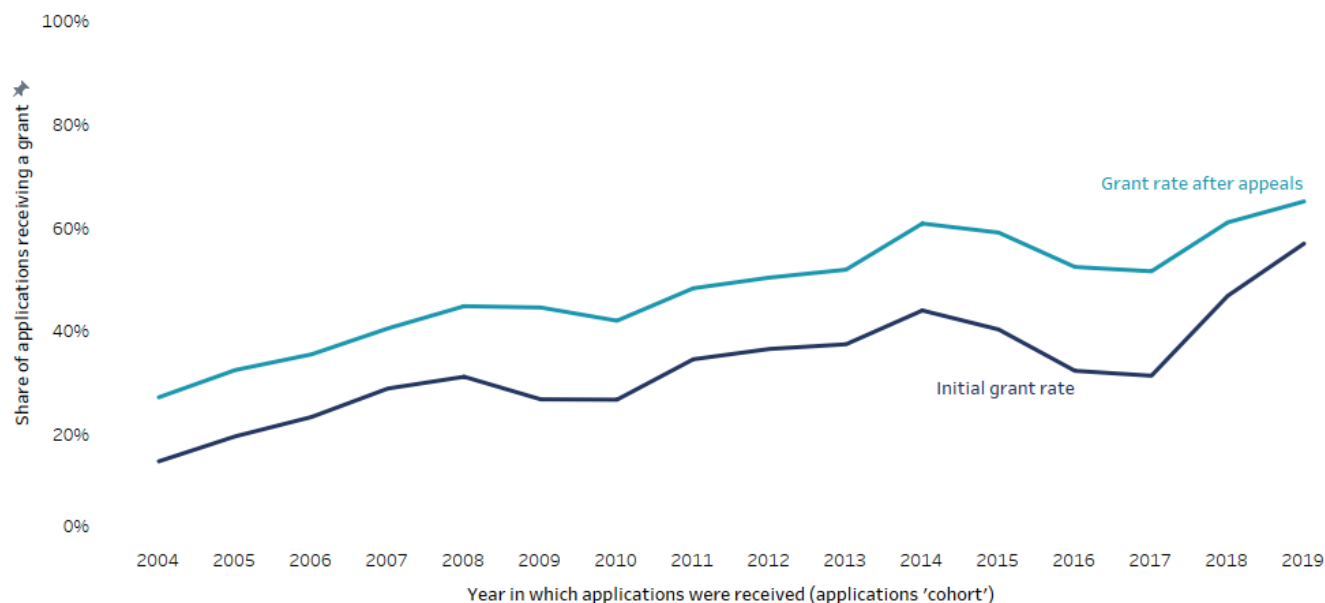
For applications received in the decade from 2010 to 2019 with known outcomes as of May 2021, successful appeals increased success rates by between 12 and 21 percentage points each year (Figure 6).

Changes in grant rates following appeal are in part the result of changes in the success rate of appeals. The share of concluded appeals that were successful increased from a low of 19% in 2004 to a high of 49% in 2021 (Home Office, 2022b).

Figure 6

How do appeals against initial decisions on asylum applications affect grant rates?

Main applicants; for applications received in 2004 to 2019, as at May 2021



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Outcome analysis of asylum applications, Asy_D04.

Note: Excludes withdrawn applications and those awaiting an outcome as of May 2021. A grant refers to a grant of asylum or other form of permission to stay, such as humanitarian protection or discretionary leave.



The share of asylum applications that received an initial decision within six months fell from 87% in Q2 2014 to 6% in Q2 2021

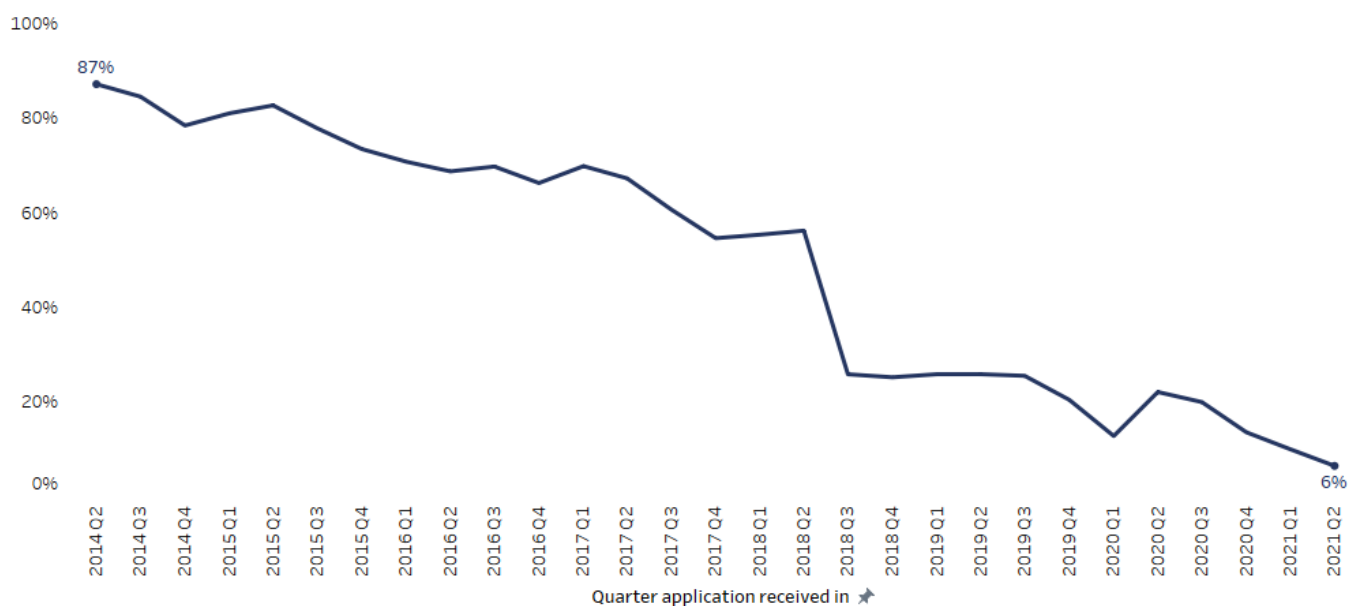
The time it takes for asylum seekers to receive an initial decision on their application has increased substantially in recent years. In Q2 2014, 87% of applications received an initial decision within six months – compared with 6% in Q2 2021 (Figure 7).

The average number of days claimants had waited for an initial decision increased from 233 in 2017, to 351 in 2019, to 449 in 2020. For unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, it peaked at 550 days for those who received a decision in 2020 (Neal, 2021, p. 7).

A report by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration points to several potential explanations for slow processing times, including the Home Office abandoning its six-month ‘service standard’ for asylum claims in January 2019, a target that has not yet been replaced; inadequate training; low staff morale; and high staff turnover (Neal, 2021). Other factors that are likely to influence the time taken to process asylum applications include: changes in administrative policy and management, including the end of the Detained Fast-Track process in 2015; resource constraints or capacity (although the number of asylum caseworkers stood at the highest level in a decade: 600 in the financial year 2020/21); and the shifting characteristics of applicants themselves, with some claims taking longer to resolve than others.

Figure 7

Share of asylum applications receiving an initial decision within six months, UK, Q2 2014 to Q2 2021
Adult main applicants



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of UK Visas and Immigration Transparency data, Immigration & Protection data, Asy_01.



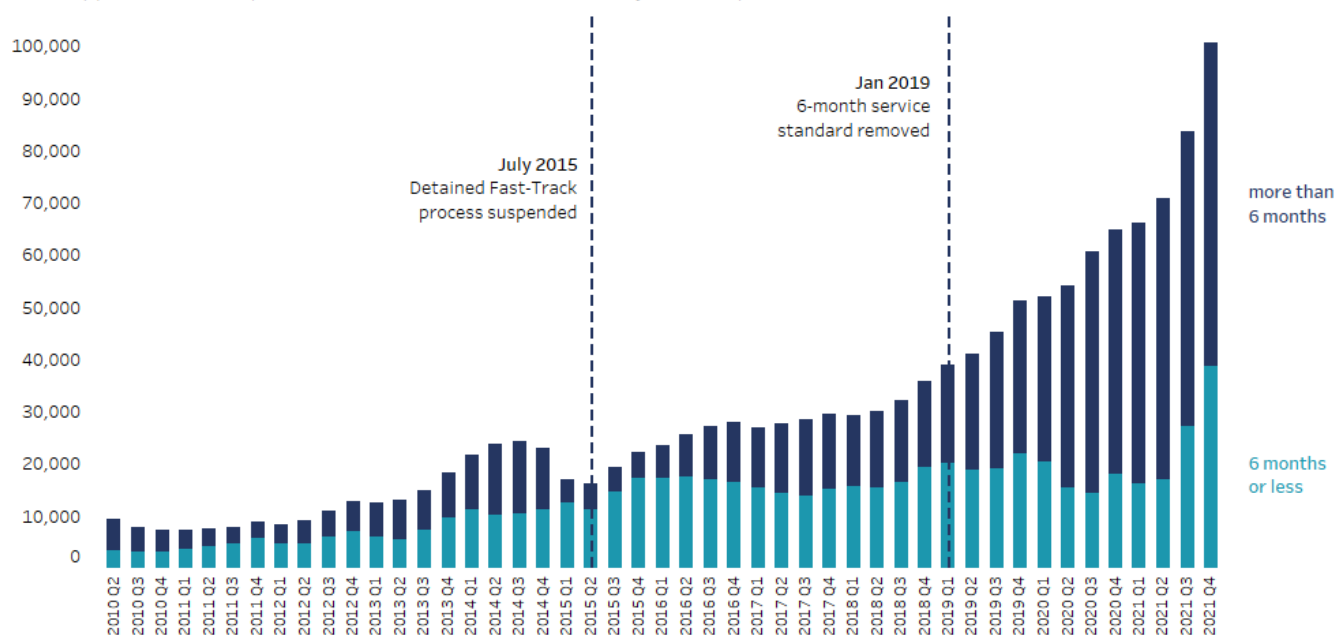
On 31 December 2021, around 101,000 people were awaiting an initial Home Office decision on their asylum application

The asylum backlog has increased substantially in recent years, due to an increase in applications, and applications taking longer to process. On 31 December 2021, there were around 101,000 people awaiting an initial decision on their asylum claim (including main applicants and dependants) – a more than ten-fold increase on the number awaiting an *initial decision* on 30 June 2010 (Figure 8). A further 4,360 were awaiting further review, such as the outcome of an appeal to the First-tier Tribunal. Of the 101,000 people awaiting an initial decision from the Home Office, 62% had been waiting for more than six months.

Figure 8

Number of people awaiting an initial decision on their asylum claim, Q2 2010 to Q4 2021

Main applicants and dependants; counts taken on the last day of each quarter



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Asylum applications awaiting a decision, Table Asy_D03.
 Note: Includes cases lodged since 1 April 2006. Last day in each quarter = 31 March, 30 June, 30 September, 31 December.



Research shows that longer asylum waiting times have negative impacts on long-term employment outcomes for asylum seekers (Ruiz and Vargas-Silva, 2021), and that being unable to work while waiting for a decision is also likely to hinder long-term integration (Refugee Action, 2018).

The distribution of asylum seekers and resettled refugees is highly uneven across the UK

The only data available on where asylum seekers live in the UK is for those on Section 4 or Section 95 support, which are received by those who cannot support themselves financially.

On 31 December 2021, there were around 60,000 asylum seekers in receipt of Section 95 or Section 4 support, of whom around 56,000 (93%) were living in dispersed accommodation, which houses asylum seekers across the UK. The region of the UK with the most asylum seekers per 10,000 of its resident population was the North East, which hosted around 19 asylum seekers per 10,000 residents. The region of the UK with the least asylum seekers when adjusting for population was the South East, which hosted around two asylum seekers per 10,000 residents (Figure 9, Regional bar chart).

Out of the UK’s 374 unitary and lower-tier local authorities (Office for National Statistics, 2021), 210 were recorded as having at least one asylum seeker registered there as of 31 December 2021, meaning that 164 (44%) were recorded as having no asylum seeker registered (although the data also include 401 asylum seekers in an “Unknown” local authority, who could be registered in any local authority). Just 25 local authorities, 7% of the total, hosted more than half (51%) of all asylum seekers on Section 4 or Section 95 support. The local authority with the most dispersed asylum seekers was Glasgow City, with 4,400 (Figure 9, Local authority table).

The UK also hosts resettled refugees, on which geographical data are available. From 1 January 2010 to 31 December 2021, 31,101 people were resettled in the UK under its six resettlement schemes (excluding the Afghan scheme, which opened in January 2022), including 20,319 resettled from 2014 under the VPRS.

As of 31 December 2021, the region with the largest number of resettled refugees relative to its population was Northern Ireland, with around 10 per 10,000 residents. London hosted the fewest relative to its population, with just over 1 person per 10,000 (Figure 9, Regional bar chart).

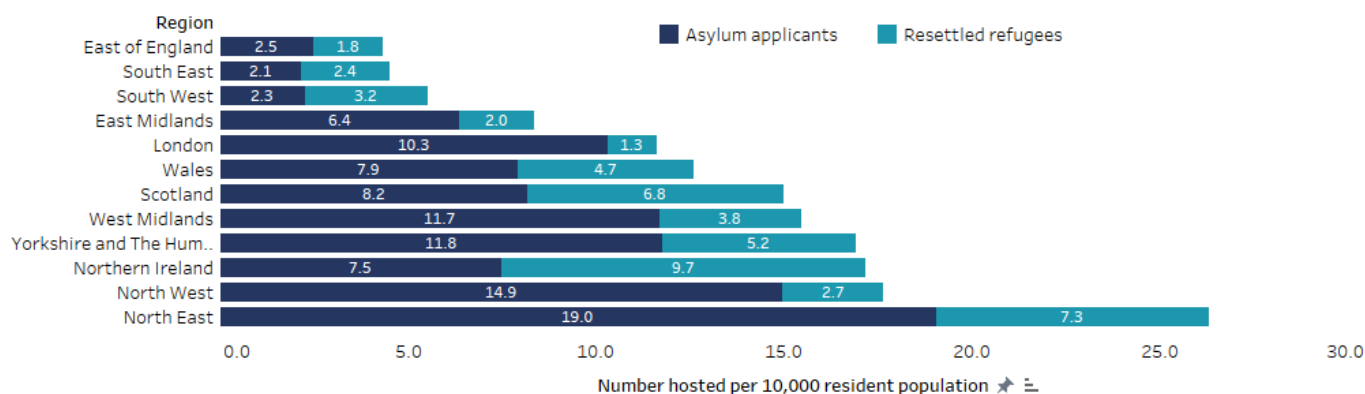
Figure 9

Where do asylum applicants and resettled refugees live in the UK?

By region per 10,000 resident population (bar chart) and by local authority (table), as at 31 December 2021

Select chart:

- Regional bar chart
- Local authority table



Source: Data on asylum seekers and resettled refugees: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Section 95 support by local authority (Table Asy_D11), and Resettlement by local authority (Res_D01). Population estimates: Office for National Statistics, Population estimates for the UK, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland: mid-2020, Table MYE2 - Persons.

Note: Asylum seekers refers to main applicants and dependants on either Section 4 or Section 95 support in dispersed accommodation. Population estimates are for mid-2020, except for historical local authorities to whom refugees were resettled but which no longer exist (marked with an *). The data include 401 asylum seekers in an unknown region or local authority. The data include refugees who were resettled from 2014 to 2021 and refer to their initial place of residence, from which they may since have left.



In recent years, the Home Office has housed asylum seekers in “contingency accommodation”, including two disused military sites and hotels or B&Bs. From 21 September 2020, Penally Training Camp in Wales and Napier Barracks in Folkestone housed asylum seekers, with Penally Camp holding around 200 people at its peak (Neal, 2021, p. 33); and Napier Barracks in Folkestone around 400 asylum seekers at its peak in January 2021 (Neal, 2021, p. 12)). Penally Camp was closed on 21 March 2021. Napier continues to house asylum seekers, with 272 residents as of 23 March 2022 (Neal, 2022, p. 10).

There are no regularly published statistics on the number of asylum seekers housed in hotels or B&Bs. A [report](#) by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration reveals a sharp increase in 2021 in the number of people housed in hotels: from around 8,000 in May to around 22,000 in November (p. 9). By early February 2022, it was [reported](#) that around 25,000 asylum seekers and 12,000 people evacuated from Afghanistan were living in UK hotels.

In 2021, the top five most common countries of nationality of people who applied for asylum in the UK were Iran, Iraq, Eritrea, Albania and Syria

Table 1 shows the fifteen most common countries of nationality of people (main applicants and dependants) who applied for asylum in the UK in 2021.

The share of applications that result ultimately in a grant of asylum-related protection varies significantly by nationality. For example, looking at applications received across the three-year period 2017 to 2019, the share of Syrian nationals who had received a grant of asylum or other leave by May 2021 was 92% (taking into account appeals), while for Indian nationals it was 6% (Table 1).

Table 2

Nationality of people seeking asylum in the UK: the top 15 most common in 2021

Main applicants and dependants

Country	Asylum seekers in 2021	% of all people seeking asylum in 2021	% ultimately granted asylum or other leave	Trend, 2001–2021
Iran	10,446	18%	78%	
Iraq	7,721	14%	50%	
Eritrea	5,019	9%	83%	
Albania	4,754	8%	35%	
Syria	3,895	7%	92%	
Afghanistan	3,088	5%	67%	
Sudan	2,385	4%	77%	
Vietnam	1,844	3%	69%	
El Salvador	1,310	2%	67%	
Pakistan	1,159	2%	40%	
India	1,125	2%	6%	
Nigeria	1,027	2%	34%	
Bangladesh	887	2%	26%	
Ethiopia	843	1%	55%	

Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Asy_D01, and Outcome analysis of asylum applications, Asy_D04.
 Note: 'Share ultimately granted asylum or other leave' is the share of applications (main applicants) received in 2017 to 2019 inclusive that had resulted in a grant of asylum or other leave as of May 2021, taking into account appeals to the First-tier Tribunal but not higher courts, and excluding applications that were withdrawn or are pending.



Of all refugees resettled in the UK from January 2010 to December 2021, around 70% were Syrian citizens

From 1 January 2010 to 31 December 2021, around 31,101 refugees were resettled in the UK under its six different resettlement schemes. Around three-quarters (76%) were citizens of Middle Eastern countries, and 17% were citizens of sub-Saharan African countries. Most were nationals of Syria: 68%.

Resettled refugees are of a small number of nationalities. The top five most common countries of nationality of refugees resettled in the UK from 2010 to 2021 inclusive make up 91% of the total, and the top ten 98% (Table 2).

Table 3

Nationality of refugees resettled to the UK: the top 10 most common

For refugees resettled in the UK between 1 January 2010 and 31 Dec 2021

Country of nationality	Refugees resettled	Share of all resettled refugees, 2010 to 2021
Syria	21,168	68%
Iraq	2,070	7%
Somalia	1,982	6%
Congo (Democratic Republic)	1,774	6%
Sudan	1,178	4%
Ethiopia	1,058	3%
Bhutan	359	1%
Afghanistan	320	1%
Eritrea	308	1%
Occupied Palestinian Territories	225	1%

Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Applications, initial decisions, and resettlement, Asy_D02.

Note: Includes refugees resettled under the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, Vulnerable Children Resettlement Scheme, Mandate Scheme, Gateway Protection Programme, Community Sponsorship Scheme, and UK Resettlement Scheme.



These figures do not include refugees resettled under the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme, for which there are currently no data, or those who moved to the UK under the Ukraine schemes (see our briefing on [Migration and the Ukraine crisis](#)). As of 5 July 2022, the Ukraine Family Scheme, which opened for applications on 4 March 2022, had received 51,900 applications (with one application required per person), with 44,900 visas issued. The Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme (also known as Homes for Ukraine), which opened on 18 March, had received 123,200 applications as of 5 July, with 103,300 visas issued. This means that as of 5 July 2022, a total of 175,100 applications had been submitted for both schemes, with 148,300 visas issued – although only 91,000 of these visa holders have actually arrived in the UK by 4 July 2022: 28,700 under the Family Scheme, and 62,300 under the Sponsorship Scheme.

When compared against EU+ countries, in 2021 the UK ranked 6th in the absolute number of people to whom it gave protection, comprising asylum seekers and resettled refugees

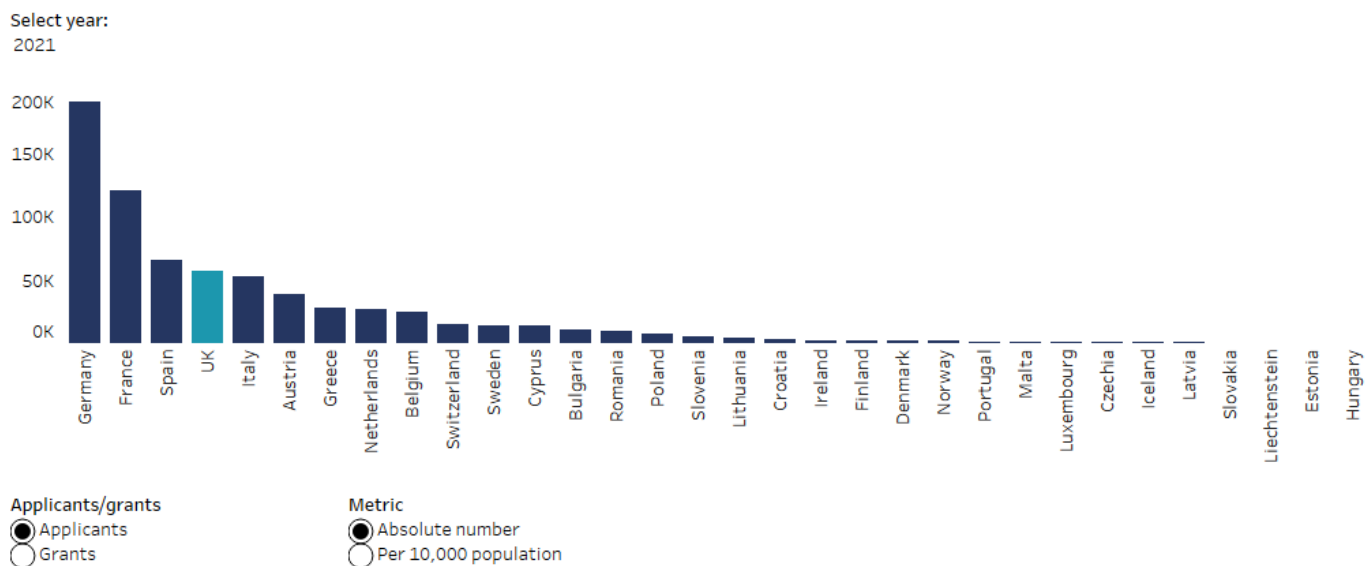
With regard to the in-country asylum process, in 2021, the UK received around 56,500 asylum applicants, the fourth highest when compared with the EU+ (the EU-27 plus Switzerland and the three EEA countries, Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway). In the same year, the UK granted asylum or another form of protection to around 13,000 people (at initial decision, excluding appeals), placing it sixth in the league table. Germany ranks first on both measures, receiving around 191,000 asylum applicants in 2021, and granting asylum-related protection to around 60,000 people at initial decision that year (Figure 10).

When adjusting for population size, the UK ranks 18th when compared with the EU+, having granted protection in 2021 to two asylum seekers per 10,000 of its resident population of 67 million.

Figure 10

Number of asylum applicants and grants of asylum: the UK and the EU+

Per year, 2008 to 2021; absolute numbers and per 10,000 population; main applicants and dependants; *does not include resettled refugees*



instance decisions on applications by citizenship, age and sex (migr_asydcfstst) (positive decisions). Date of data retrieval: 17 August 2022. Population estimates are from Eurostat, demo_pjan, as at 1 January in each year, except for the UK for 2021, which uses ONS mid-year 2020 estimates.

Note: Numbers are rounded to the nearest five. 'Grants' includes all people receiving a *positive* grant, which includes a grant of refugee status, authorisation to stay for humanitarian reasons, or any other kind of permission to stay, *at initial decision*, excluding the results of appeals. The success rate of applications in any year cannot be calculated by dividing the number of grants by the number of applications, because grants will be made with respect to applications made in previous years.

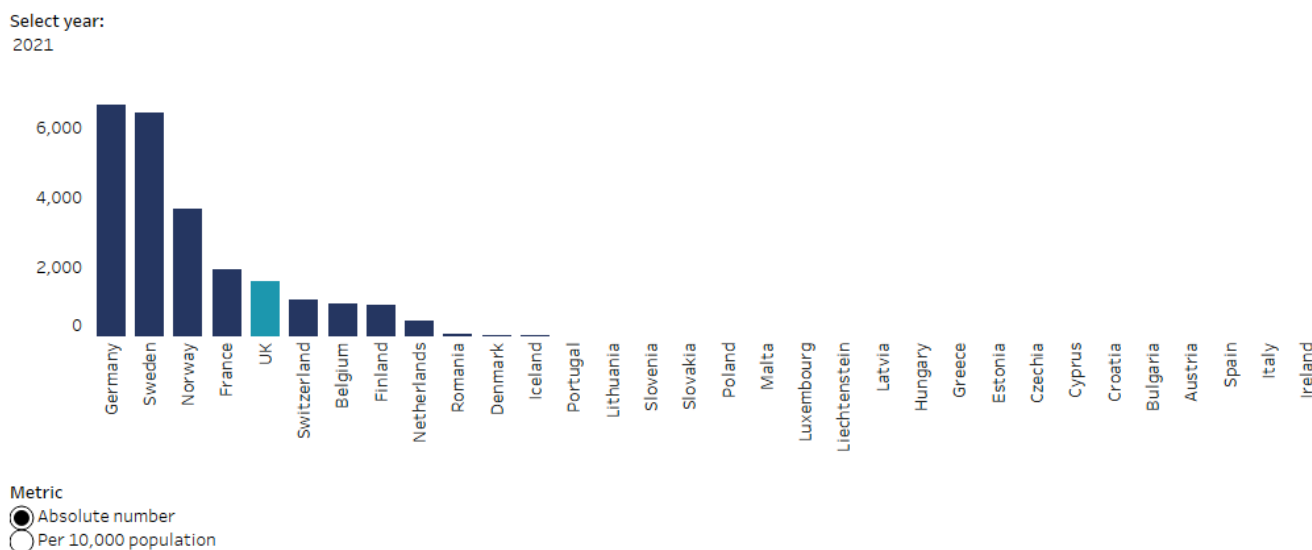


These figures do not include people given protection under refugee resettlement programmes. Under such programmes, the UK resettled around 33,000 refugees from 2008 to 2021 (all the years for which data are available), behind first-place Sweden, which resettled 40,000. When adjusting for population, the UK falls to 11th in the league table. In 2021, the UK resettled around 1,600 refugees, down from 5,600 the previous year, whilst Sweden and Germany resettled over 6,000 people each in 2021 (Figure 11).

Figure 11

Resettled refugees: the UK and the EU+

Total refugees resettled per year, 2008 to 2021; absolute number and per 10,000 population



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Eurostat, 'Resettled persons by age, sex and citizenship (migr_asyresa)'. Population estimates are from Eurostat, demo_pjan. Date of data retrieval: 17 August 2022. Note: Numbers are rounded to the nearest five. Country population estimates are as at 1 January in each year. The EU+ comprises the EU countries, Switzerland, and the three EEA countries Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway.

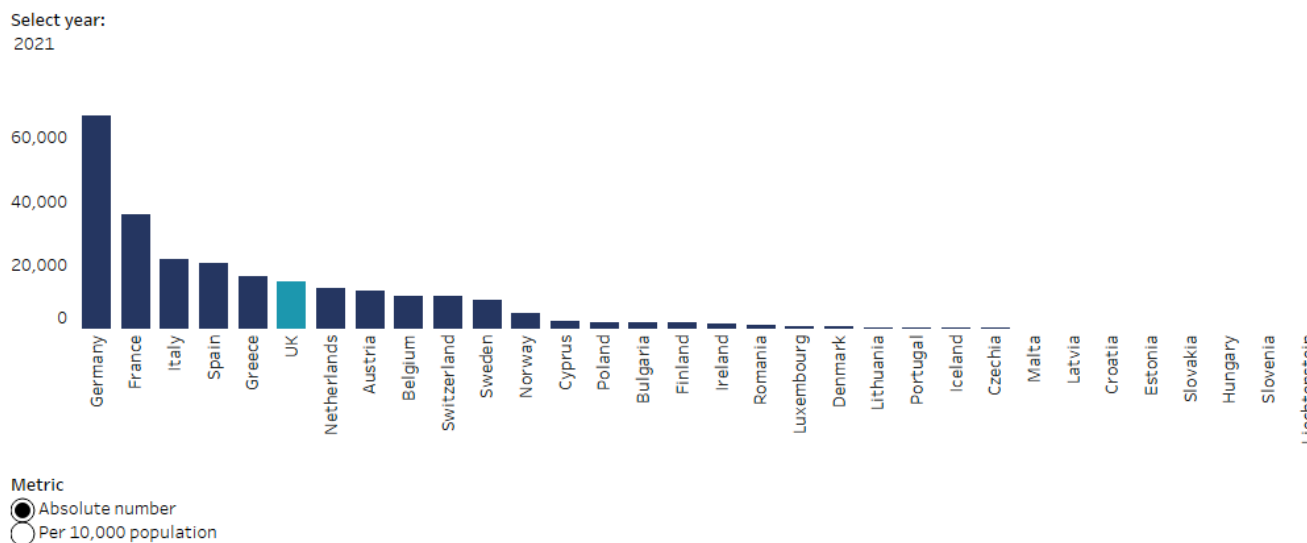


When looking at *all people* given protection in 2021 – including through both the in-country asylum route and through refugee resettlement – the UK ranked 6th among EU+ countries (Figure 12). The UK falls to 19th place in the ranking when adjusting for population size.

Figure 12

Total people given protection: the UK and the EU+

Per year, 2008 to 2021; absolute numbers and per 10,000 population; includes both people granted asylum from in-country applications (at initial decision) *and* resettled refugees



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Eurostat, 'First instance decisions on applications by citizenship, age and sex (migr_asydcfsta)' (grants); and 'Resettled persons by age, sex and citizenship (migr_asyresa)'. Date of data retrieval: 17 August 2022. Population estimates are from Eurostat, demo_pjan, as at 1 January in each year. Note: People granted asylum comprises all people receiving a *positive* grant, which includes a grant of refugee status, authorisation to stay for humanitarian reasons, or any other kind of permission to stay. These are grants *at initial decision*, and therefore exclude the outcomes of successful appeals, which increase the overall grant rate.



In 2021, around 6,100 people were issued with a refugee family reunion visa, and around 2,300 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children were granted asylum or other leave

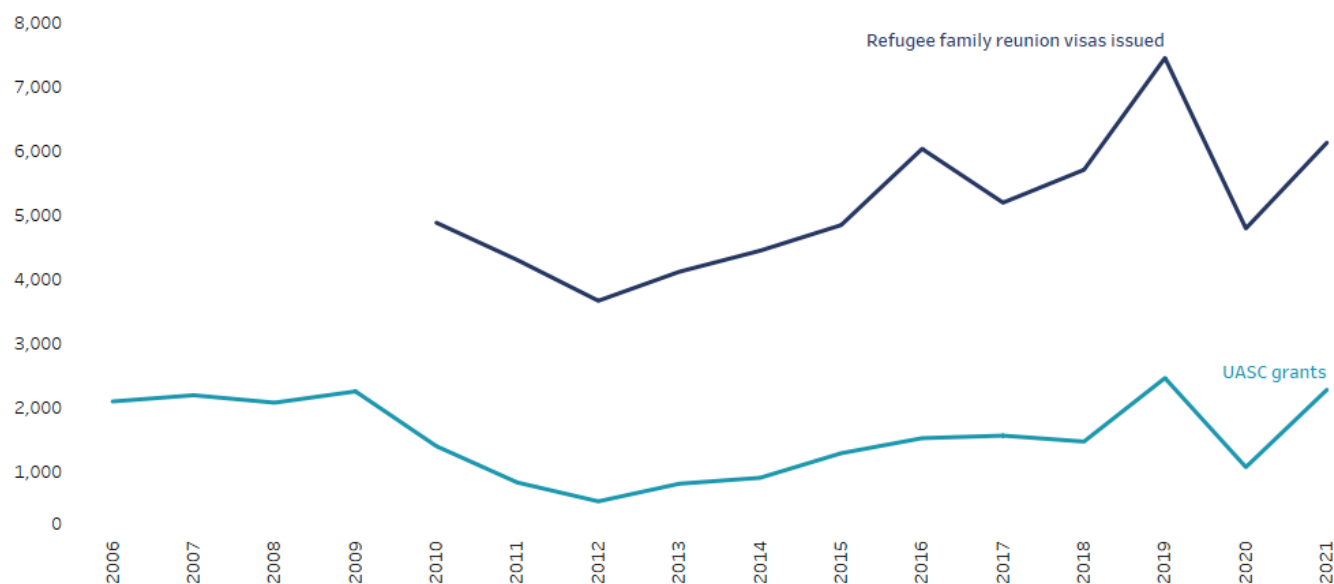
From 2010 to 2021, an average of around 5,100 people were issued with family reunion visas per year, of whom 57% were under 18. Around 6,100 such visas were issued in 2021, 18% fewer than in 2019 before the pandemic (Figure 13).

An unaccompanied asylum-seeking child (UASC) is a person under 18 who is applying for asylum in the UK in their own right, is separated from both parents, and is not being cared for by a relative or guardian in the UK. From 2006 to 2021, there were around 32,244 initial decisions on applications from UASCs, of which 77% (24,771) were grants of asylum or other permission to stay. In 2021, there were 2,278 such grants – similar to the figure for 2019 (Figure 13).

Figure 13

Number of refugee family reunion visas issued, and asylum-related grants to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, UK, 2006 to 2021

UASC asylum grants are at initial decision



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Family reunion visa grants, Table Fam_D01; and Applications, initial decisions and resettlement, Table Asy_D02.

Note: 'Asylum-related grants' refers to grants of asylum or other leave at initial decision, which will increase due to the appeal or reconsideration of cases.



The financial cost of operating the UK's asylum system reached £1.4bn in 2020

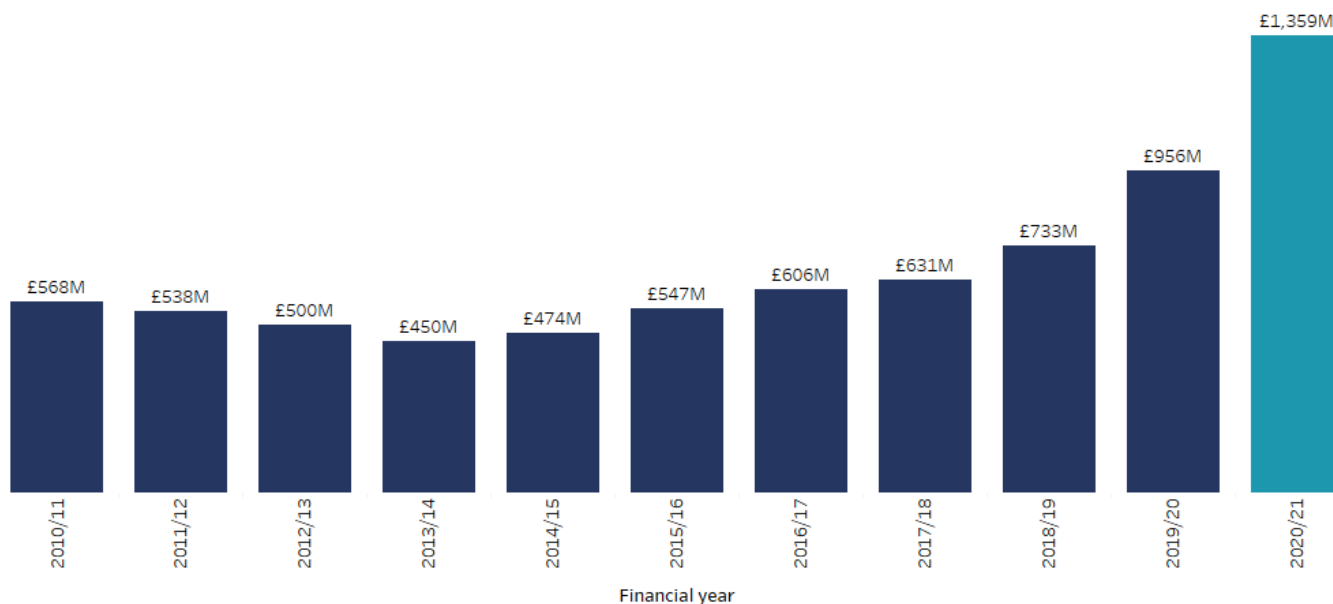
The financial cost of the UK's asylum system has increased substantially in recent years: from £538 million in the financial year 2011/12 to £1.35 billion ten years later in FY 2020/21 (Figure 14).

These costs are perhaps not exhaustive, but include: the costs associated with deciding a case (interviews, asylum casework, issuing a decision); managing any appeals; accommodation and asylum support payments; costs of detention; enforcement costs, including escorting and assisting voluntary returns; and the cost of the Home Office's relevant department staff and buildings.

Figure 14

Annual financial cost (£) of the UK's asylum system, 2010/11 to 2020/21

Financial years



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration and Protection Transparency Data, Table Asy_04.

Notes: Costs include those associated with deciding a case (interviews, asylum casework, issuing a decision); managing any appeals; accommodation and asylum support payments; costs of detention; enforcement costs, including escorting and assisting voluntary returns; and the cost of the Home Office's relevant department staff and buildings.



Despite nominal increases, in real terms the asylum support payment level in 2022 was 27% lower than in 2000

Under Section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, destitute asylum seekers are entitled to free accommodation and a weekly cash allowance to cover their essential living needs. The Home Office reviews regularly the level of the weekly cash allowance, and has changed it 13 times since 2000 (Figure 16: Nominal payment).

When introduced in 2000, asylum seekers were entitled to one of a variety of different payments, depending on their age and whether they were a lone parent or part of a couple. In 2015, the government replaced these different payments by a single payment level for all destitute asylum seekers.

On 3 April 2000, the weekly payment was set at £36.54 for a single adult aged 25 or over, equivalent to £5.22 a day. On 10 August 2015, the equivalent daily payment for all asylum seekers was set at £5.28 per day. The payment has increased three times since then, most recently in February 2022, to £40.85 a week, equivalent to £5.84 per day.

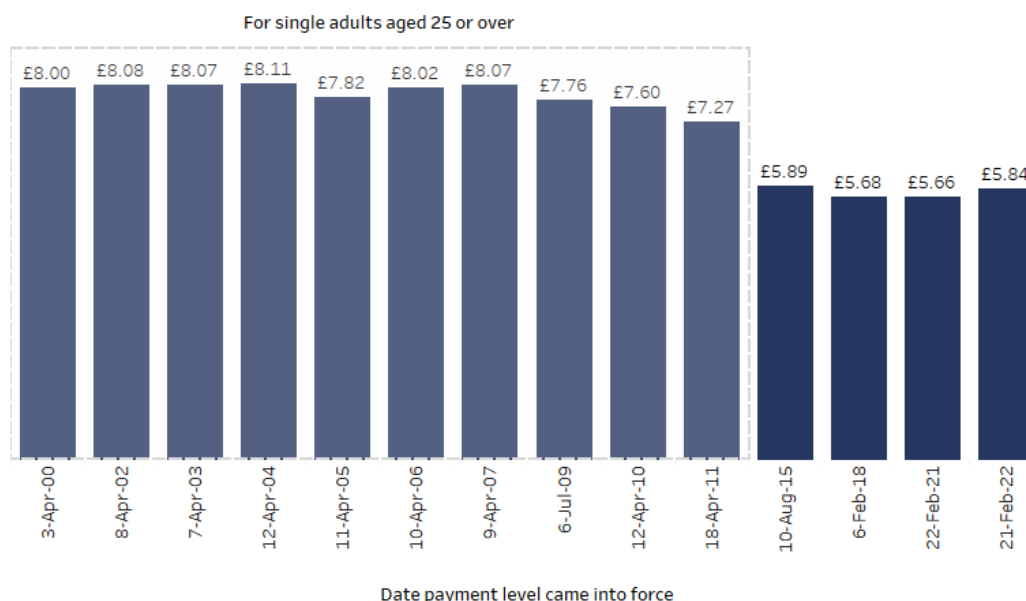
These increases have not kept up with inflation. In real terms, the payment level in 2022 is 27% lower than in 2000 (in 2000, £5.22 bought £8 worth of goods and services in 2021 GBP). Since the single asylum support payment was introduced in 2015, the level of the payment has fallen in real terms (Figure 16: 'Inflation-adjusted').

Figure 15

Asylum support payments have fallen in real terms since 2000

Per-day nominal payments; and inflation-adjusted estimates (based on 2021 GBP), 2000 to 2022

Select measure:
 Inflation-adjusted (in 2021 GBP)
 Nominal



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of legislation.gov.uk: The Asylum Support Regulations 2000 and subsequent legislation amending it, up to The Asylum Support (Amendment) Regulations 2022.

Notes: Inflation-adjusted estimates were calculated using the Bank of England Inflation Calculator. Inflation-adjusted estimates are given in 2021 GBP, except for 2022, which is given in 2022 GBP. From 3 Apr 2000 to 9 August 2015, payment levels are given for a single person aged 25 or over (reflecting the most common category of asylum seeker); from 10 August 2015 onwards, there was only one type of asylum support payment.



Evidence Gaps and Limitations

We do not know how many people the UK has ever granted asylum or another form of asylum-related protection to, because published statistics go back only as far as 1979. Moreover, these published statistics record the outcomes of initial decisions only and do not take into account appeals, which increase the number of people that are ultimately granted asylum-related permission to stay.

The government does not provide regular statistics on asylum claimants broken down by their method of entry into the UK. Therefore, we do not know what share arrived by visa-free travel, on a visa, using fake documents, or by clandestine means, such as by small boat or stowing away on a lorry.

Nor do we have clear information on how long asylum applications take. Data are provided on the share of applications receiving an initial decision within 6 months, and on the number of applications currently pending, but it is not possible using existing data to calculate how long it takes the ‘average’ asylum application to receive an initial decision or final outcome.

There is also limited information on what happens to refused asylum seekers. Some depart with the assistance or oversight of the government, for which data are available. However, others depart without notifying the authorities, or remain in the UK as irregular migrants (see the Migration Observatory briefing, [Irregular migration in the UK](#)). Data on people departing the UK have improved in the past few years, in part due to the introduction of ‘exit checks’ in 2015. However, significant data gaps remain for earlier cohorts.

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Based at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford, the Migration Observatory provides independent, authoritative, evidence-based analysis of data on migration and migrants in the UK, to inform media, public and policy debates, and to generate high quality research on international migration and public policy issues. The Observatory's analysis involves experts from a wide range of disciplines and departments at the University of Oxford.



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