



BRIEFING

Where do migrants live in the UK?

AUTHORS: Denis Kierans
PUBLISHED: 24/03/2022
NEXT UPDATE: 25/03/2024

2nd edition



www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk

This briefing looks at the distribution of migrants across UK nations, regions and local authorities within the UK, providing data by country of birth, nationality and reason for migration (i.e. work, study, family and asylum).

Key Points

London is the most popular destination in the UK, particularly for non-EU migrants.

Out of all areas in the UK, London appears to have experienced the greatest decline in both its workforce and foreign-born population during the pandemic.

Non-EU migrants outnumber EU migrants in most UK nations, regions and local authorities.

Non-EU born migrants are more likely than EU-born migrants to live in London, and less likely to live in the East, the South West and Scotland.

Migrants in London are less likely to have come for family and more likely to have come for work or asylum than migrants in other parts of the UK.

Asylum seekers awaiting a decision on their application make up a higher share of the population in the north of England, the West Midlands and Wales, and a lower share in the South East, East of England and South West.

Understanding the evidence

Most of the analysis in this briefing uses data from the UK's Labour Force Survey (LFS) and related Annual Population Survey (APS). The LFS, which is conducted by the UK Office for National Statistics (ONS), is the largest household survey in the UK and is designed to be representative of the population. The LFS/APS have some important limitations. Some people are excluded, such as residents of communal establishments like hostels, and other groups may be undercounted due to survey non-response. There is particular uncertainty about the reliability of the estimates for 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic and 2020 figures should not be compared with previous years.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) and the Migration Observatory have also published several pieces discussing the effects of the pandemic on the LFS/APS data collection and the reliability of the population estimates derived from those surveys (e.g. Athow, 2021; Sumption, 2021).

Except where otherwise stated, migrants are defined as people born outside the UK in this briefing, including those living in Northern Ireland who were born in the Republic of Ireland. This definition may differ from those used in other studies (see the Migration Observatory briefing, [Who counts as a migrant?](#)). Since 2010, the LFS asks foreign-born respondents about the reason why they came to the UK. Respondents may choose from several options including employment, family re-unification, study, and asylum. These categories are self-reported and may not be the same as the visa type under which the individual entered the country or their current visa status. The analysis on reason for migration excludes Northern Ireland and local authorities because of the small sample size. Data for Northern Ireland are unavailable at the local authority level.

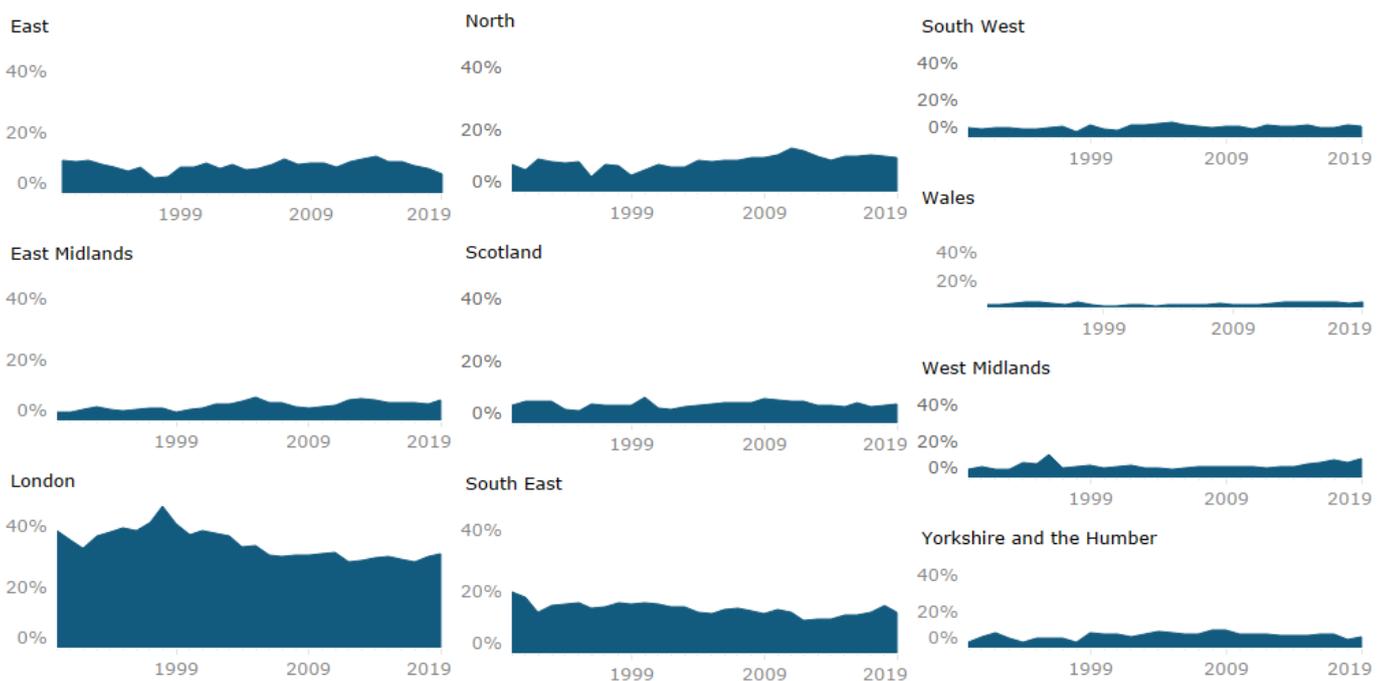
The analysis also uses data from ONS' Long-Term International Migration (LTIM) Estimates until 2019. These estimates are primarily derived from the International Passenger Survey (IPS), but also incorporate information from other sources. Due to Covid-19, however, the IPS was suspended on 16 March 2020 and, when it was re-introduced in January 2021, it no longer included a migrant sample boost. Instead, ONS plans to use administrative data to produce migration statistics as part of their [population and migration statistics system transformation journey](#). However, these data are not yet regularly published. ONS uses the UN standard definition of a long-term international migrant – a person moving to another country for at least one year – to produce its estimates of long-term immigration.

London is the most popular destination in the UK, particularly for non-EU migrants

Figure 1 presents the destination of long-term non-UK citizens who immigrated to the UK from 1990 to 2019 (before the suspension of the International Passenger Survey (IPS) in March 2020). For most of the past 20 years, London received roughly 30% of all migrants coming to the UK. The share of those who report the capital as their region of destination peaked at 46% in 1998 and has declined since then.

Figure 1

Long-term immigration, 1991-2019: Percent of inflows going to each UK region



Source: ONS, Table 3.14, IPS estimates by citizenship by area of destination or origin within the UK. Note: 'North' includes North West and North East. Statistics for Northern Ireland only available from 2008, so are excluded from the chart.



The most recent available data show that, from mid-2019 to mid-2020, the local authorities estimated to have the largest inflows of international migrants were City of London (13%), Westminster (8%) and Camden (7%), followed by Oxford and Cambridge (each 5%) (ONS, 2021). In absolute numbers, Westminster received the most international migrants over this period (21,300) followed by Camden (20,000) and Birmingham (17,400). For more local-level migration data see [the Migration Observatory Local Data Guide](#).

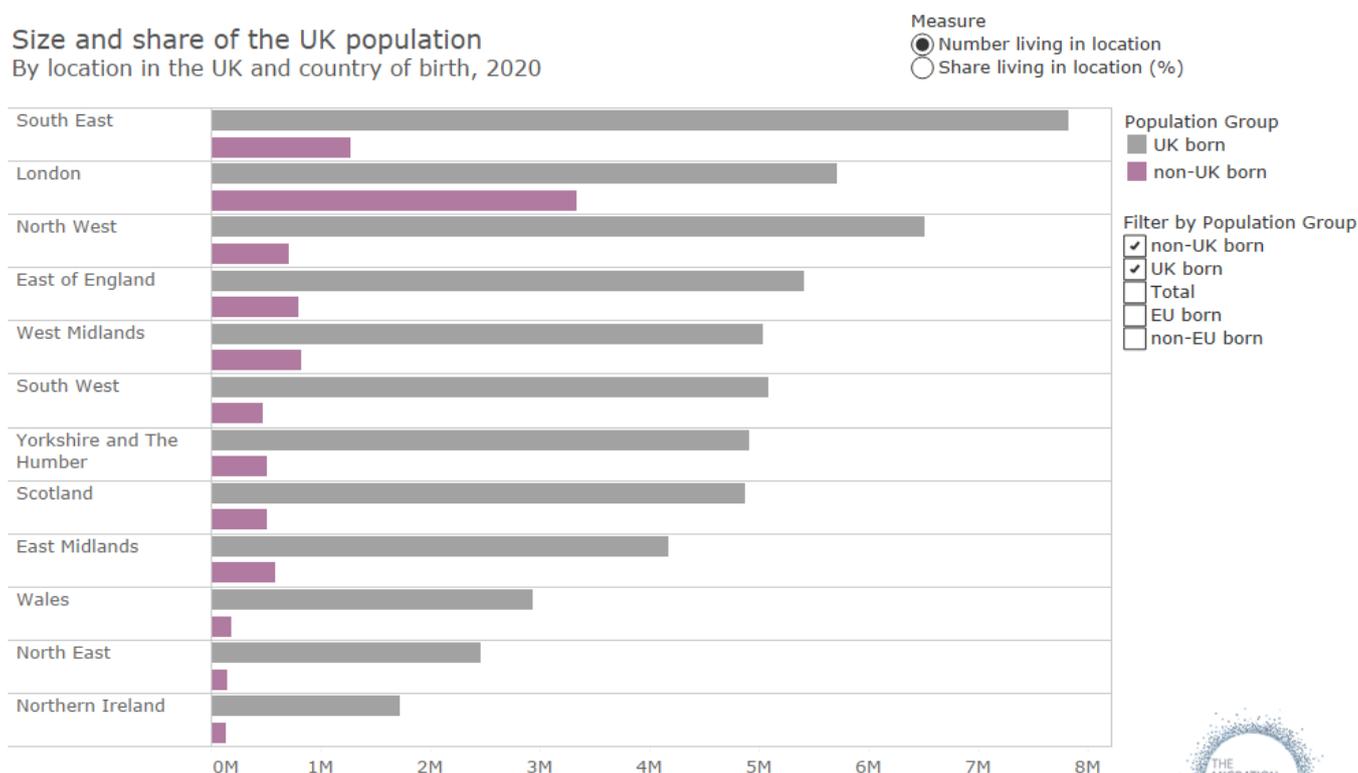
These patterns are reflected in the distribution of the foreign-born resident population across the UK, for which the data are more up to date. Although London made up only 14% of the total UK population in 2020, it was home to 35% (3.3 million) of the UK’s foreign-born population (Figure 2). This represented more than 2.5 times as many foreign-born residents as in the South East, a region with about the same total population as London. Migrants born in non-EU countries were particularly likely to live in London – amounting to 2.3 million people, or 39% of all non-EU born migrants living in the UK in 2020.

Although Northern Ireland has the smallest total and foreign-born populations in the UK, it has a larger EU-born population than the North East. This includes people born in the Republic of Ireland, which the ONS estimates comprised about 40% (36,000) of Northern Ireland’s EU-born population in 2020 (ONS, 2020).

Figure 2

Size and share of the UK population

By location in the UK and country of birth, 2020



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the Annual Population Survey.



London appears to have experienced the biggest decline in its foreign-born population and workforce during the pandemic

There is significant uncertainty about what happened to migration as a result of Covid-19 (see the Understanding the Evidence section above for more detail), but London appears to be the most affected part of the UK. While the data for 2020 onwards remain uncertain, figures suggest a decline in London’s foreign-born population of 4.3% between Q3 2019 and Q3 2020, compared to the UK average of 1.4% (Figure 3). For more information see the Migration Observatory commentary, [Where did all the migrants go?](#)

Figure 3

Foreign born population share: change from Q3 2019 to Q3 2020 (Waves 3-5 only)



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of LFS, Q3 2019 and Q3 2020. Note: excludes residents in communal accommodation.

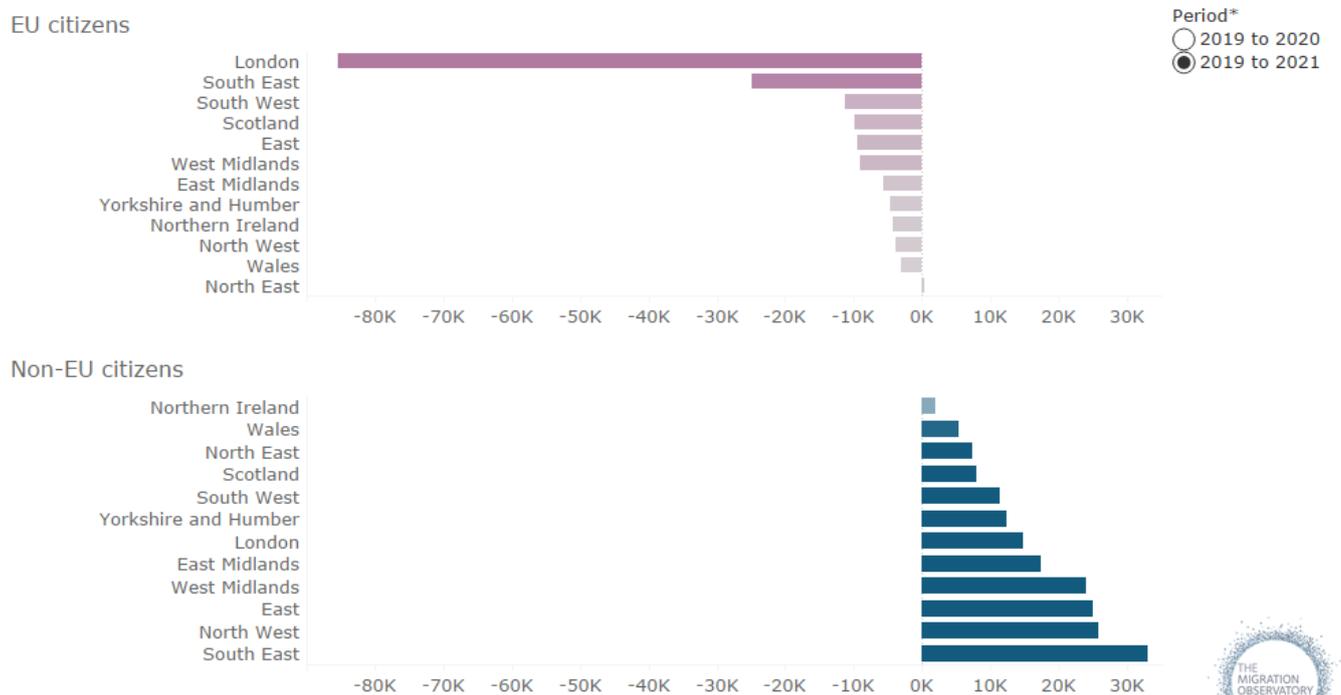


The number of EU national employees declined during the pandemic across the UK. Between mid-2019 and mid-2021, HMRC tax records show there were fewer EU national workers in all areas of the UK except for the North East (+400, or 1% of its EU workforce), with London experiencing the most significant decline (-85,400, 10%), followed by the South East (-24,800, 7%).

Despite this, by mid-2021, the UK’s foreign national workforce had recovered to pre-pandemic levels. This is due to growth in the number of non-EU national workers in all areas of the UK throughout the pandemic, but primarily since mid-2020. Between mid-2019 and mid-2021, the South East saw the largest total increase in its non-EU workforce (33,000, or 11%). Although the non-EU workforce is much smaller in the North East, it experienced the largest relative increase over the same period, jumping by 25%. These figures reflect both job losses and people moving (internationally or within the UK), and cannot distinguish between them.

Figure 4

Change in employees by nationality and location in the UK, 2019 to 2020 and 2021 (all mid-year)



Source: ONS and HMRC, Employments from Pay As You Earn Real Time Information (RTI): Ad hoc estimates of payrolled employees by NUTS1 region and nationality, seasonally adjusted. Note: These data exclude the self-employed; (*) End of Q2 for all years.

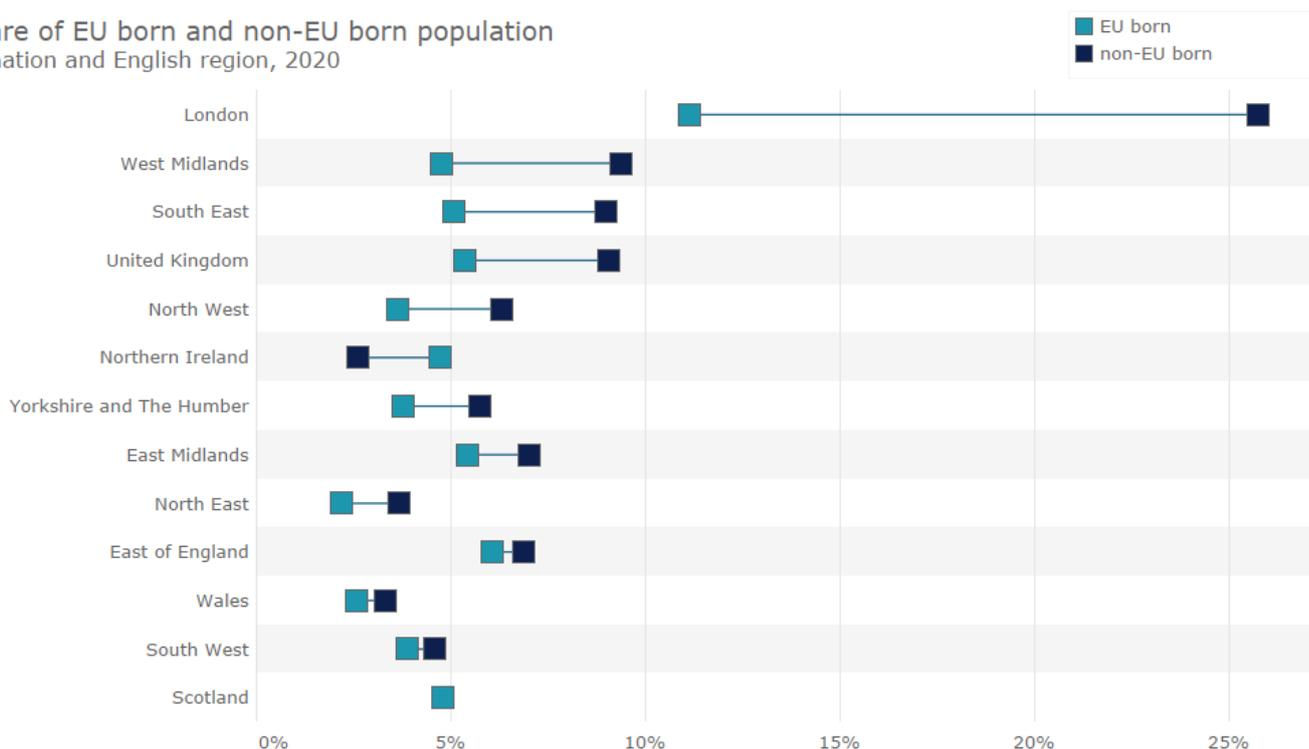


Non-EU migrants outnumber EU migrants in most parts of the UK

Migrants born in non-EU countries outnumber EU migrants across all regions, with the exception of Northern Ireland, where there are more EU migrants, and Scotland where the number of EU and non-EU born migrants is the same. In London, for example, non-EU migrants comprised an estimated 26% of the total population in 2020, while EU migrants made up 11% (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Share of EU born and non-EU born population
By nation and English region, 2020



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Annual Population Survey, 2020



In most local authorities (LAs), the EU-born population accounted for less than half of the foreign-born population in 2020, including in all but one of London’s boroughs (Waltham Forest) (Figure 6). Where data were sufficiently robust to report, the EU-born population made up the majority of the foreign-born population in 86 of the 325 LAs (26%), including 13 out of 29 Scottish LAs (45%).

Figure 6

EU-born population and its share of the foreign-born population
By local authority, 2020

Search Local Authorities
No items highlighted



Note: The size of each bubble reflects the total EU-born population in the given local authority. Foreign-born population data by local government district are not available for Northern Ireland. Estimates are not available for some localities or have been suppressed due to confidentiality requirements. Areas with values measured as or rounded to zero are excluded. Source: ONS, Population of the UK by country of birth and nationality, January 2020 to December 2020, Table 1.1, (for England and Wales); NRS, Population by Country of Birth and Nationality 2020, Table 3a (for Scotland).

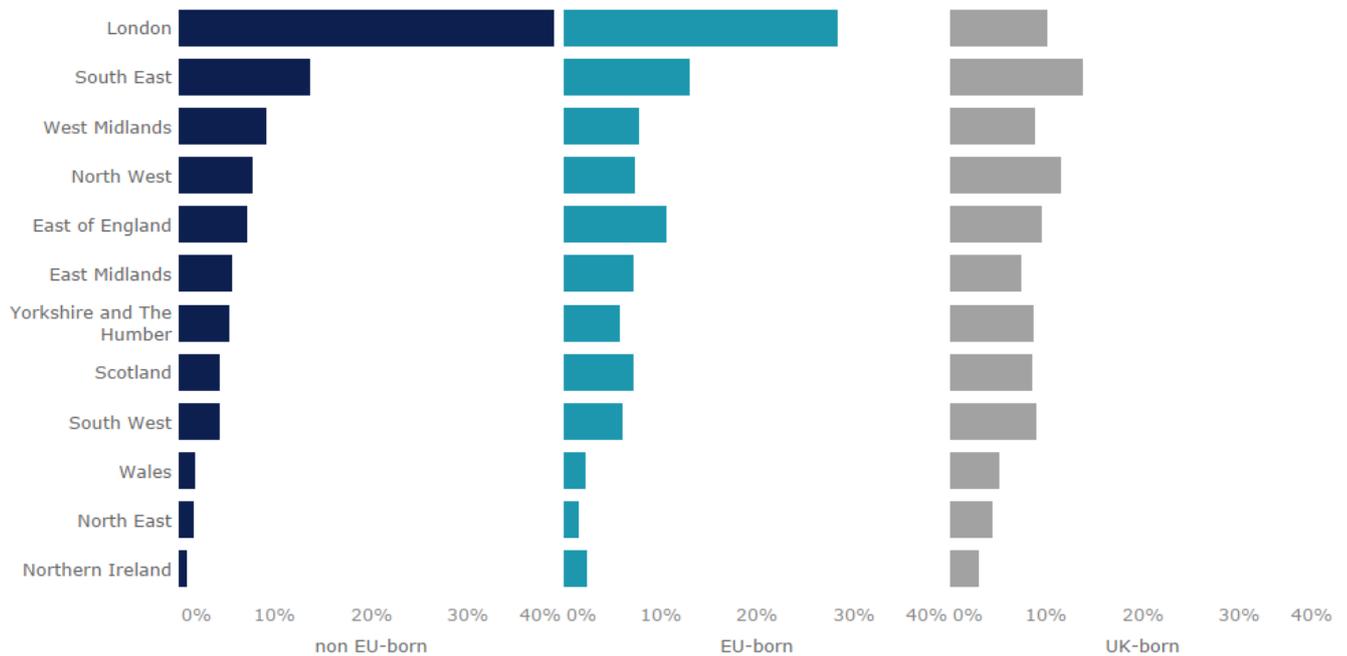


Non-EU migrants are more likely than EU migrants to live in London, while EU migrants are more likely than non-EU migrants to live in the East, the South West and Scotland

In 2020, 39% of non-EU migrants living in the UK resided in London, while 28% of EU migrants did so, which is broadly similar to past years (Figure 7). Meanwhile, EU-born migrants are more likely to live in the East of England, Scotland and the South West and Scotland. Differences in the concentrations of the two groups in other parts of the country are relatively small.

Figure 7

Regional distribution of the UK population
By place of birth, 2020



Source: Migration Observatory Analysis of the Annual Population Survey, 2020.



The reasons migrants came to the UK do not vary greatly across the nations and regions

The reasons for having come to the UK is relatively stable across the different nations and regions (Table 1). EU migrants in 2020 were most likely to have come for work, followed by family and study; non-EU migrants typically had come to the UK for family reasons, followed by work, study and asylum.

Migrants in London were less likely to have come for family reasons and more likely to have come for work or asylum than in other parts of the UK.

Table 1

EU-born and non-EU born population, by main reason for migration and location in the UK, 2020

EU born

Area	Employment	Study	Family	Asylum	Other	Total
East	169,000	44,000	136,000	-	26,000	375,000
East Midlands	110,000	22,000	106,000	-	16,000	255,000
London	460,000	170,000	289,000	-	78,000	997,000
North East	19,000	6,000	29,000	-	3,000	56,000
North West	99,000	26,000	110,000	-	27,000	261,000
Northern Ireland	39,000	5,000	36,000	-	7,000	87,000
Scotland	107,000	51,000	79,000	-	20,000	257,000
South East	187,000	64,000	169,000	-	38,000	458,000
South West	75,000	19,000	100,000	-	19,000	213,000
Wales	31,000	8,000	31,000	-	10,000	80,000
West Midlands	106,000	25,000	118,000	-	26,000	276,000
Yorkshire and the Humber	84,000	11,000	90,000	-	18,000	203,000
United Kingdom	1,484,000	453,000	1,294,000	-	288,000	3,519,000

Non-EU born

Area	Employment	Study	Family	Asylum	Other	Total
East	85,000	61,000	227,000	13,000	39,000	425,000
East Midlands	68,000	32,000	184,000	18,000	34,000	337,000
London	556,000	403,000	972,000	145,000	253,000	2,328,000
North East	17,000	14,000	47,000	13,000	4,000	96,000
North West	78,000	63,000	254,000	35,000	25,000	455,000
Northern Ireland	13,000	5,000	24,000	4,000	3,000	49,000
Scotland	42,000	51,000	138,000	11,000	15,000	258,000
South East	187,000	103,000	433,000	18,000	74,000	815,000
South West	52,000	24,000	144,000	9,000	24,000	254,000
West Midlands	105,000	51,000	324,000	29,000	42,000	551,000
Wales	19,000	12,000	48,000	15,000	9,000	103,000
Yorkshire and the Humber	52,000	38,000	168,000	35,000	19,000	313,000
United Kingdom	1,275,000	858,000	2,962,000	347,000	542,000	5,984,000

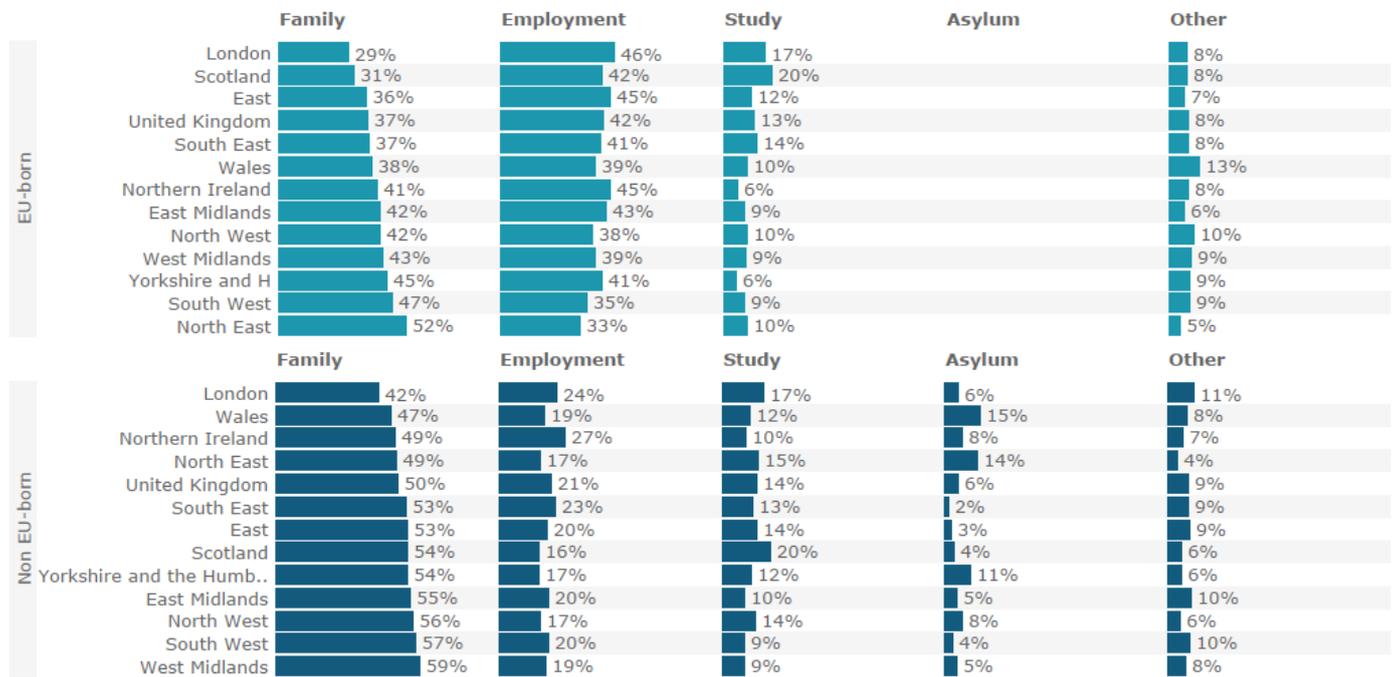
Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Annual Population Survey. Note: A hyphen (-) denotes low statistical reliability due to sample size.



Family migrants made up half of the UK's population of non-EU born migrants, although the share is higher in the West Midlands, South West and North West and lower in London (Figure 8). In 2020, only 6% of non-EU migrants came to the UK to seek asylum, although there was variation across the UK.

Figure 8

Share of EU and non-EU born migrants
By main reason for migration and location in the UK, 2020



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Annual Population Survey.



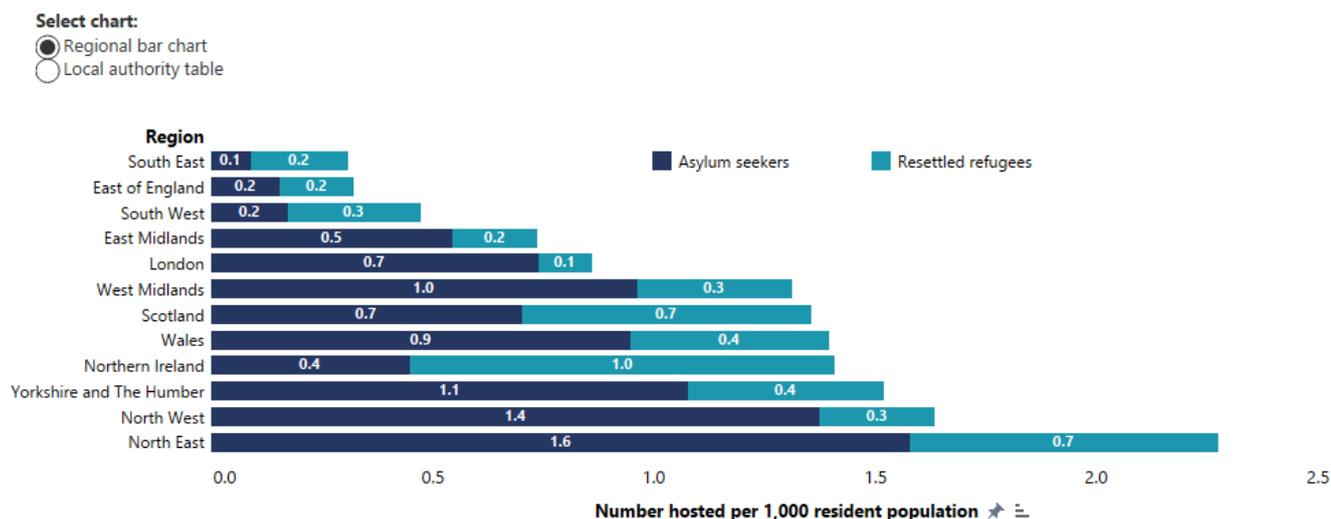
Asylum seekers are unevenly distributed across the UK

The distribution of asylum-seekers and resettled refugees across the UK is not the same as other types of migrants (Figure 9). This is due in part to the government’s ‘dispersal’ policy, which distributes the responsibility of hosting asylum-seekers away from London and the South East (Brokenshire, 2015 in Politowski and McGuinness, 2016; Bates, 2015).

Figure 9

Where are asylum seekers and resettled refugees hosted in the UK?

By region per 1,000 resident population (bar chart) and by local authority (table), as at 30 June 2020



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-2019, using April 2020 local authority district codes, Table MYE2 - Persons.
 Note: Population estimates are for mid-2019. Excludes 127 asylum seekers in an unknown region or local authority. Asylum seekers refers to main applicants and dependants on Section 95 support, which will include most, though not all, people seeking asylum, and includes those in dispersal accommodation as well as those receiving subsistence. People hosted in historical local authorities that no longer exist are included under their replacements. For example, Chiltern, which used to be a local authority, was incorporated into Buckinghamshire unitary authority in 2020. Therefore, the two refugees who were resettled in Chiltern in 2018 are included under Buckinghamshire. The data include refugees resettled from 2010 to 2020 Q2 and refer to their initial place of residence, from which they may since have left.



Several factors complicate this trend. As asylum-seekers receive refugee status, they may move away from dispersal areas. For example, among all migrants who moved to the UK for asylum since 2000 (when the asylum dispersal system was operationalised under the Asylum Act 1999), more than one quarter were living in London by 2020 (APS, 2020).

More recent complicating factors include a change in the government’s dispersal policy, which has seen a slightly larger share of asylum seekers housed in London while their claims are pending (see the [London Councils webpage on Asylum Seekers](#) for more information). The longer periods asylum seekers typically spend in dispersal areas awaiting a decision on their claim (see the Migration Observatory briefing, [Asylum and refugee resettlement in the UK](#)), may also strengthen ties to the area and make plans to move to another place less attractive (Kearns and Whitley, 2015; Stewart and Shaffer, 2015: 37). The impact of these changes on the longer-term distribution of asylum-seekers and refugees across the UK is not yet clear, in part due to the effects of Covid-19 on the evidence base (as outlined in this briefing’s Understanding the Evidence section, above).

Evidence gaps and limitations

The analysis in this briefing has a number of limitations. Sample sizes and limitations in survey data (as explained in the Understanding the Evidence section above) mean that it is not always possible to identify statistically significant differences between migrants’ settlement patterns in different parts of the UK.

Second, the data do not show whether the migrant has always lived in their current region of residence since arrival. Therefore, one cannot tell whether the current region of residence of a migrant is the same as their region of destination or how long they lived in a region before moving to another one. This makes it difficult to construct a full picture of the dynamics of migrants’ internal migration within the UK.

The main variable used for the information on reasons for migration is self-reported. The alternative responses to choose from are not mutually exclusive as people's decisions to migrate are multifaceted. While someone might cite family as their main reason for migration, their migration decisions may also be informed by the available opportunities to study or work.

Acknowledgements

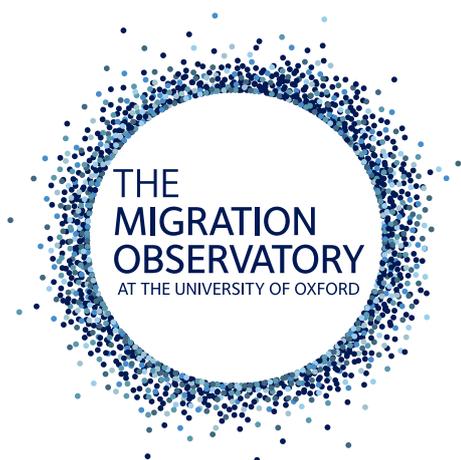
Thanks to **Ben Corr** for comments on a previous draft of this briefing.

This briefing was produced with the support of Trust for London and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. Trust for London is one of the largest independent charitable foundations in London and supports work which tackles poverty and inequality in the capital. The Paul Hamlyn Foundation is an independent funder working to help people overcome disadvantage and lack of opportunity, so that they can realise their potential and enjoy fulfilling and creative lives.

The use of the ONS statistical data in this briefing does not imply the endorsement of the ONS in relation to the interpretation or analysis of the statistical data. This briefing uses research datasets, which may not exactly reproduce National Statistics aggregates.

References

- Annual Population Survey (2020) Office for National Statistics. January to December 2020.
- Athow, J. (2021) Carry that weight: Reducing the effects of COVID-19 on the Labour Force Survey. ONS. [Available online.](#)
- Bates, M.W. (2015) Asylum: Question for Home Office. UK Parliament: Written answer, 11 December 2015. UIN HL4217. [Available online.](#)
- Kearns, A. & E. Whitley (2015) Getting There? The Effects of Functional Factors, Time and Place on the Social Integration of Migrants. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 41(13): 2105–2129. [Available online.](#)
- Stewart, E., & M. Shaffer (2015). Moving on? Dispersal policy, onward migration and integration of refugees in the UK. University of Strathclyde, Glasgow. [Available online.](#)
- ONS (2016) Labour Force Survey – user guidance. Volume 1: Background and Methodology.
- ONS (2020) Population of the UK by country of birth and nationality: individual country data. [Available online.](#)
- ONS (2021) Local area migration indicators, UK. [Available online.](#)
- Politowski, B. and T. McGuinness (2016) Policy on the dispersal of asylum seekers. House of Commons Library Research Briefing. [Available online.](#)
- Sumption, M. (2021) Where did all the migrants go? Migration data during the pandemic. Migration Observatory, COMPAS. [Available online.](#)
- Weeks, A., A. Fallows, P. Broad, S. Merad & K. Ashworth. No date. Non-response Weights for the UK Labour Force Survey? Results from the Census Non-response Link Study. ONS.



The Migration Observatory

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.



COMPAS

The Migration Observatory is based at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford. The mission of COMPAS is to conduct high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform policy-making and public debate, and engage users of research within the field of migration.

www.compas.ox.ac.uk

About the authors

Denis Kierans
Researcher,
The Migration Observatory
denis.kierans@compas.ox.ac.uk

Press contact

Rob McNeil
Head of Media and Communications
robert.mcneil@compas.ox.ac.uk
+ 44 (0)1865 274568
+ 44 (0)7500 970081

Recommended citation

Kierans, D. (2022) *Where do migrants live in the UK?* Migration Observatory briefing, COMPAS, University of Oxford

