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 0.6% of the UK population in 2019.

COVID-19 has had a major impact on asylum seeking and refugee resettlement in the UK.

Taking into account appeals, 54% of asylum applications from 2016 to 2018 are estimated to have received a grant of asylum-related protection by May 2020 – up from 36% at initial decision.

The share of asylum applications that received an initial decision within six months fell from 87% in 2014 Q2 to 20% in 2019 Q4.

On 30 June 2020, around 56,000 people were awaiting an outcome on their asylum claim.

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

In 2019, the top five most common countries of nationality of people seeking asylum in the UK were Iran, Albania, Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

Of all refugees resettled in the UK from January 2010 to May 2020, around 70% were Syrian nationals.

In 2019, the UK ranked 6th among the EU-28 in the absolute number of people to whom it granted asylum-related protection (excluding resettled refugees).

In 2019, around 7,500 people were issued with a refugee family reunion visa, and around 2,500 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children were granted asylum or other leave.

**Understanding the Policy**

Asylum is the protection that is granted by a nation-state to a person who has left their country to escape serious threat to their life or liberty. Such people are called refugees.

The United Nations 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees 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).

A person who wishes to seek asylum in the UK must first get to the UK. It is not possible to apply from outside the country, and there is no asylum visa. Therefore, to claim asylum in the UK a person must enter either irregularly, such as by small boat or by using false documents, or for another purpose, such as tourism or study. Applicants will not be granted asylum if the government believes they represent a danger to the UK (Home Office, 2020a, p. 85).
There are three possible outcomes of an asylum application. First, an applicant can be recognised as a refugee and granted asylum with five years’ leave (i.e., permission to stay in the UK), after which they may apply, free, for settlement. Second, the applicant can be granted another form of leave: humanitarian protection (HP); discretionary leave (DL); leave under family or private life rules; unaccompanied asylum-seeking child (UASC) leave; leave outside the rules; Calais leave; or exceptional leave to remain. Third, the asylum claim can be refused. If a claim is refused, the applicant can appeal against the initial decision. 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 dependant parents (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 £5.66 per day. The Home Office may only grant an asylum applicant permission to work 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 graduate 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).

**Refugee resettlement**

Unlike asylum seekers, whose claims are heard in the UK, resettled refugees are identified outside of the UK by the UN and then transferred to the UK. In recent years, the UK has operated four resettlement schemes. These were suspended in March 2020 due to COVID-19, and will restart in 2021 (Refugee Council, 2020). 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. The Mandate Scheme and Gateway Protection Programme (GPP) are for refugees anywhere in the world (for more information on the UK’s resettlement schemes see Wilkins, 2020). The government has stated that in 2020 the VPRS, VCRS and GPP will be combined into a single ‘global resettlement scheme’, which aims to resettle around 5,000 refugees in its first year.

**Refugee family reunion**

The UK currently allows an adult granted refugee status or humanitarian protection to be joined in the UK by their dependent children (under 18) and a spouse or partner, 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 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).
Understanding the Evidence

Data on foreign-born UK residents’ main reason for moving to the UK come from the Labour Force Survey, 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.

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 applicants (i.e., the number of people who claim asylum), we include both main applicants and dependants. ‘Asylum applications’ refers to main applicants only.

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 95’ support) that 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 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 Section 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. Asylum seekers in receipt of support under ‘Section 4(2)’ are also provided with accommodation, but data are not available on their location.
People who originally came to the UK to seek asylum made up an estimated 0.6% of the UK population in 2019

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 is equivalent to 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

These data include those granted asylum or an alternative form of leave, 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).
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 – at that time sites of war.

Looking at all people who sought asylum from 2010 to 2019, 67% were male, and 66% of all grants of asylum or other leave at initial decision were to men or boys (Applications, initial decisions, and resettlement, Asy_D02).

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, 2020, p. 12).

**COVID-19 has had a major impact on asylum seeking and refugee resettlement in the UK**

The coronavirus pandemic and associated lockdown has had a substantial impact on all major aspects of asylum seeking in the UK (Figure 3). Comparing numbers for Q2 2020 with those for Q2 2019, asylum applicants (main applicants and dependants) fell by 41%, to the lowest quarterly count since 2010. Grants of asylum or other leave at initial decision were down by 55% – their lowest level since 2014, despite applications having increased in recent years. Issuances of refugee family reunion visas fell by 92%. And refugee resettlement, which was not possible during Q2 2020, fell to zero.
Taking into account appeals, 54% of asylum applications from 2016 to 2018 are estimated to have received a grant of asylum-related protection by May 2020 – up from 36% at initial decision.

Of all applications (main applicants) received in the period 2016 to 2018 inclusive with a known outcome as of May 2020, excluding withdrawn applications, 36% resulted in a grant of asylum or other leave at initial decision.

Over this period, 70% of initial decisions were appealed. Most appeals are against refusals, but some appeals are against positive decisions to seek a stronger form of leave (Home Office, 2020b). Of these appeals with a known outcome, 43% were successful. This increased the grant rate from 36% at initial decision to 54% after appeal (Figure 4).
For applications received in 2012 to 2018 with known outcomes as of May 2020, successful appeals increased success rates by between 12 and 20 percentage points each year (Figure 5).

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 45% in 2015.
The share of asylum applications that received an initial decision within six months fell from 87% in 2014 Q2 to 20% in 2019 Q4

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 20% in Q4 2019 (Figure 7).

There are several possible explanations for this trend. Factors that are likely to influence the time taken to process asylum applications include the number of applications received; changes in administrative policy and management, including the end of the Detained Fast-Track process in 2015; resource constraints or capacity; and the shifting characteristics of applicants themselves, with some claims taking longer to resolve than others. In early 2019, the Home Office abandoned its 6-month ‘service standard’ for asylum claims, citing the desire to prioritise cases involving vulnerable applicants and those where an initial decision needed to be reconsidered (Allison and Taylor, 2019).
On 30 June 2020, around 56,000 people were awaiting an outcome on their asylum claim

The asylum backlog has increased substantially in recent years, due to an increase in applications, and these applications taking longer to process. On 30 June 2020, there were around 54,000 people awaiting an initial decision on their asylum claim (including main applicants and dependants) – a more than five-fold increase on the number awaiting an initial decision on 30 June 2010 (Figure 6). A further 2,403 were awaiting further review, such as an appeal to the First-tier Tribunal. Of the 54,000 awaiting an initial decision from the Home Office, around 70% had been waiting for more than six months.
The distribution of asylum seekers and resettled refugees is highly uneven across the UK

As of 30 June 2020, there were around 46,000 asylum seekers in receipt of Section 95 support in the UK, of whom around 42,000 (92%) were living in dispersed accommodation, which aims to house asylum seekers across the UK. The region of the UK with the most asylum seekers per 1,000 of its resident population was the North East, which hosted around 17 times more than the South East (Figure 8, regional bar chart).

Out of the UK’s 379 unitary and lower-tier local authorities (Office for National Statistics, 2020), 231 were recorded as having at least one asylum seeker registered there as of 30 June 2020, meaning that 148 (39%) were recorded as having no asylum seeker registered (although the data also include 127 asylum seekers in an “Unknown” local authority, who could be registered in any local authority). Just 20 local authorities, 5% of the total, hosted around 50% of all asylum seekers on Section 95 support. The local authority with the most asylum seekers was Glasgow City (Figure 8, local authority table).

The UK also hosts resettled refugees. From 1 January 2010 to 30 June 2020, 29,506 people were resettled in the UK under its four resettlement schemes, including 20,007 under the VPRS. However, since the government announced the target of resettling an additional 20,000 refugees under the scheme by 2020, 19,768 refugees were resettled (an additional 239 refugees were resettled under the scheme before the target was announced, and do not count towards it). An additional 7,403 refugees were resettled under the Gateway Protection Programme from 1 January 2010 to 30 June 2020. The VCRS resettled 1,826 children from late 2016 to June 2020 – 61% of the target of 3,000 by 2020 (Home Office, 2020d). As of June 2020, the region with the largest number of resettled refugees per 1,000 of its population was Northern Ireland, eight times more than London (Figure 8, regional bar chart).
In 2019, the top five most common countries of nationality of people seeking asylum in the UK were Iran, Albania, Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

Table 1 shows the fifteen most common countries of nationality of people who claimed asylum in the UK in 2019.

The share of applications that result ultimately in a grant rate of asylum or other leave varies significantly by nationality. For example, looking at applications received across the three-year period 2016 to 2018, the share of Syrian nationals who had received a grant of asylum or other leave by May 2020 was 88% (taking into account appeals), while for Indian nationals it was 6% (Table 1).
Of all refugees resettled in the UK from January 2010 to May 2020, around 70% were Syrian nationals.

Of the roughly 29,500 refugees resettled in the UK from 1 January 2010 to 30 June 2020 under the country’s four resettlement schemes, 75% were nationals of Middle Eastern countries, and 18% were nationals of sub-Saharan African countries.

The top ten most common countries of nationality of refugees resettled in the UK make up 98% of the total (Table 2).
In 2019, the UK ranked 6th among the EU-28 in the absolute number of people to whom it granted asylum-related protection (excluding resettled refugees)

In 2019, Germany granted asylum or another form of protection to around 70,000 people (at initial decision, excluding appeals) – more than any other EU country, and equivalent to 32% of all people offered asylum-related protection in the EU that year. The UK ranked sixth, offering asylum-related protection to around 15,000 people at initial decision (Figure 8).

When adjusting for population size, the UK ranks 15th among the EU-28, having granted protection in 2019 to 0.2 asylum seekers per 1,000 of its resident population of 67 million.
These figures do not include people given protection under refugee resettlement programmes. In absolute terms, the UK accepted more resettled refugees in the decade from 2010 to 2019 than any other EU country. When adjusting for population size, the UK ranks eighth among the EU–28 (Figure 9).
In 2019, around 7,500 people were issued with a refugee family reunion visa, and around 2,500 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children were granted asylum or other leave.

In the ten-year period from 2010 to 2019, an average of around 5,070 people were issued with family reunion visas per year, of whom 58% were under 18. Around 7,500 such visas were issued in 2019, the highest in the decade (Figure 10).

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 2019, there were 28,358 initial decisions on applications from UASCs, of which 71% (21,421) granted asylum or other form of leave. In 2019, there were 2,462 such grants – the highest on record (Figure 10).
Evidence Gaps and Limitations

We do not know how many people the UK has ever granted asylum or another form of leave 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 leave.

The government does not provide information 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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References


Related material

Migration Observatory briefing – [Settlement in the UK](https://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/)
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.

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