



BRIEFING

Citizenship and naturalisation for migrants in the UK

AUTHORS: Mariña Fernández-Reino
Madeleine Sumption
Nuni Jorgensen
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COMPAS
Centre on Migration,
Policy & Society



www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk

This briefing looks at citizenship and naturalisation among migrants in the UK. It provides data on how many migrants become UK citizens and how this varies for different migrant groups, as well as the factors that affect naturalisation.

Key Points

Based on the Census 2021 data, 43% of people born abroad said they were UK citizens.

Migrants from EU countries and non-EU migrants from high-income countries are less likely to apply for UK citizenship.

An estimated 66% of non-EU migrants with permanent status (ILR) in the UK have become British citizens ten years after getting their initial visa.

Migrants who come to the UK on a family visa receive citizenship faster than those entering with a work or a study visa, but after eight years, workers were the most likely to have become citizens.

Although there is evidence that naturalisation can improve migrants' economic and social integration, citizenship fees and language and integration requirements have created barriers to becoming a UK citizen.

People who moved to the UK as children are more likely to be British citizens, and this trend is more evident among the EU-born.

In 2021, there were an estimated 840,000 non-UK citizen children (under 17) living in the UK, of whom approximately 350,000 were born in the UK.

Non-EU-born migrants are more likely to be citizens in the UK (74%) than in EU-14 countries where they reside (58%).

Understanding the policy

What is citizenship?

Citizenship [has been defined](#) in different ways, including as a *legal status*, a source of *rights* and an indicator of *identity*. From a legal perspective, citizenship is a status that identifies a person's formal membership of a state, entitling them to hold a country's passport. Citizenship gives people certain rights, such as the right to vote in general elections (although Commonwealth citizens in the UK can vote without being UK citizens). Citizenship and naturalisation are also sometimes seen as an indicator of [identity and belonging](#), or of [social integration](#) (see also the Migration Observatory policy primer on [citizenship](#)).

While citizenship has a specific legal meaning, the concept is sometimes [used much more broadly](#) to refer to people's national identity, civic engagement, social contributions, and participation in political protest, including as claimants of rights. This briefing examines citizenship from a legal perspective. (The Migration Observatory briefing, [The social relationships of migrants in the UK](#) provides information about migrants' civic participation in British society.)

Citizenship vs. permanent status

It is important to distinguish citizenship from permanent residence or settlement –Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR), or Settled Status (for residents who applied through the EU Settlement Scheme)–, as these different statuses are often conflated in public debate. Migrants in the UK who are foreign nationals can acquire the right to live in the UK permanently without becoming citizens. Non-UK citizens who have permanent residence or settlement have extensive rights similar to those of UK citizens; for example, there are no restrictions on their right to work. Some settled migrants live their whole lives in the UK without becoming citizens. However, becoming a British citizen brings certain additional rights. In addition to voting, it is much harder for the government to deport citizens, and citizenship cannot be lost as a result of long absences from the country. There are also some specific restrictions on the jobs certain non-UK citizens can do in the public sector: most non-EU citizens who are not from the Commonwealth cannot work in the Civil Service or the Armed Forces, for example.

Becoming a UK citizen: naturalisation, registration and automatic acquisition

There are three main ways of becoming a UK citizen: automatic acquisition at birth, registration (usually for children), and naturalisation (usually for adults).

Almost all migrant adults without a British parent will have to naturalise to become UK citizens. Adult migrants who apply for citizenship must usually have lived in the UK for at least five or six years and must already have the permanent right to live in the UK (i.e., ILR for non-EU citizens and permanent residence or settled status for EU citizens). Applicants must meet a language requirement and pass the ‘Life in the UK’ test, which is designed to evaluate their knowledge of UK institutions, history and culture. The level of English language required for citizenship is ‘intermediate’, which is considered sufficient to have conversations about a range of familiar topics, but not necessarily enough to function fully in an English-speaking workplace. Applicants must have ‘good character,’ which includes paying taxes and not having a recent criminal record. They must also have been physically present in the UK for most of the previous three to five years. For a more detailed overview of naturalisation requirements, [see this report](#).

Citizenship applicants must pay a fee, which as of October 2023 was £1,530 per person, or £1,214 per child for children born in the UK to parents who are not UK citizens or settled residents. This is in addition to fees already paid for settlement, which are discussed in the Migration Observatory briefing, [Migrant settlement in the UK](#). Children who are born in the UK are not necessarily UK nationals. They will automatically be UK citizens if at least one of their parents is either a UK citizen themselves or a settled or permanent resident here; these children do not need to apply for citizenship but can apply directly for a passport. UK-born children can also *register*, e.g., if they have lived in the UK for a long time).

Understanding the evidence

This briefing relies on Migration Observatory analysis of data from the Home Office (Migrant Journey data 2022), the 2021 England and Wales Census, collected by the Office of National Statistics (ONS), and the EU-Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2019, collected by all EU member states as well as Iceland, Norway and Switzerland. Since Q4 2020, the UK is no longer included in the EU-LFS.

Home Office records are used to analyse the number of people becoming citizens. For non-EU citizens, they are also used to examine migrants’ pathways to citizenship, including the visas people entered the country on before receiving ILR and citizenship. This makes it easier to estimate the share of settled residents who become citizens among non-EU migrants compared to EU migrants.

The England and Wales 2021 Census data is used to look in more detail at the characteristics of people who do and do not hold UK citizenship. It is important to note that, unlike the Home Office records, these data are not representative of the entire UK. This is because, at the time of writing this briefing, not all nations had published their Census results. Although other sources of data, such as the Annual Population Survey, capture information about citizenship for the entire UK, we use the England and Wales Census 2021 data for this briefing because we consider them to be more reliable than the APS/LFS 2021 and 2022 data, especially for analyses by region of birth. In addition, unlike the APS, the England and Wales Census captures information on dual citizenship. Lastly, according to the [ONS](#), 93% of the foreign-born population in the UK lived in England and Wales in 2021. This means that the other nations' Census results are not likely to alter the trends significantly.

In addition to coverage, there are some other important limitations in the Census data:

- The Census asks about passports held, not directly about citizenship. This includes expired passports or travel documents that people were entitled to renew. However, it is possible that some people are citizens of a country without holding a passport from that country. This is particularly likely among UK-born persons, people with dual citizenship, and refugees.
- The Census only records one "other" (non-UK) passport. The other citizenship recorded in the Census is the *first non-UK citizenship mentioned* by respondents. It is unclear which passports people tend to mention first and what kinds of bias this could introduce. Additionally, this means that the Census only captures dual citizenship for individuals who are UK citizens, even though many people hold citizenship of two or more foreign countries.
- The Census does not tell us how respondents became UK nationals (e.g., via naturalisation, registration, or automatically). Most UK citizens born abroad will be people who migrated to the UK and later naturalised, but this category will also include people who were automatically UK citizens at birth because their parents were UK citizens.

In 2021, 43% of foreign-born residents of England and Wales said that they were UK citizens, but this share was higher for non-EU born (59%) than for EU-born (17%) migrants

In 2021, 43% of foreign-born residents in England and Wales said they were UK citizens (Figure 1). This figure is based on self-reported official Census data, which asks people about the passports they hold (see 'Understanding the Evidence' section above for important limitations of this information). This share consists of people who only have UK citizenship (37%) and those with UK-other dual citizenship (6%).

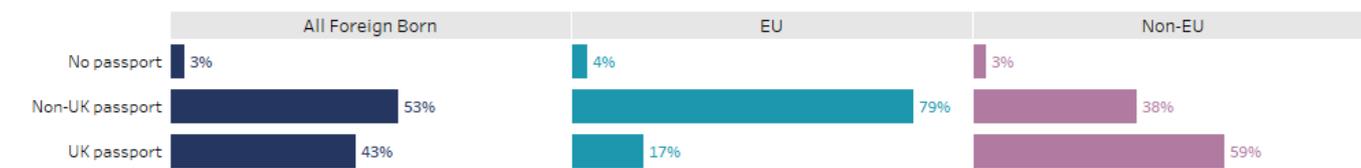
The proportion of UK citizens among people born abroad was higher (64%) for those who had been in the country for at least 10 years (since 2011, using 2021 data) and thus were more likely to be eligible to naturalise.

EU-born migrants are less likely to say they have British citizenship (17%) than those born in a non-European country (59%). A consequence is that non-EU-born migrants make up the majority of people born abroad in the UK (58% or 6.3 million in 2021), but non-EU *citizens* only represent an estimated 40% (2.4 million) of all foreign citizens living in the UK in 2021.

Figure 1

Passport Held by Region of Birth, 2021

England and Wales Only



Year of Arrival
All Arrivals

	No passport	Non-UK passport	UK passport
All Foreign Born	343,361	5,321,772	4,325,918
EU	137,809	2,900,000	615,757
Non-EU	205,552	2,421,772	3,710,161

Year of Arrival
All Arrivals

Source: Migration Observatory Analysis of the 2021 England and Wales Census.

Note: passports held data are self-reported. Respondents may be entitled to a passport for being a citizen but not hold one. The year of arrival to the UK is based on the most recent arrival.



Migrants from EU countries are less likely to apply for UK citizenship than those from outside the EU, although applications from EU citizens increased after the EU referendum 2016

Multiple factors affect migrants’ aspirations and ability to become citizens of the country they have moved to, ranging from the desire for [recognition](#) as a [full member of society](#) and the right to vote, [legal certainty](#) about their residence rights, [pragmatic advantages](#) (e.g., easier travel), to a symbol of status. Reasons for seeking citizenship are [not necessarily ‘positive’](#) and can include [migrants’ fears](#) of poor treatment or discrimination.

Some groups of migrants are more likely to apply for the citizenship of countries where they reside than others. For example, [research](#) shows that migrants from developing or politically unstable non-EU countries are more likely to naturalise than other foreign nationals, as well as those who are long-term residents or who speak the destination-country language. Migrating at a younger age or having a partner who is a citizen of the destination country has also [been linked](#) to a higher likelihood of naturalisation. Policies are also [thought](#) to play a role, and countries with more liberal citizenship policies tend to have a higher share of naturalised migrants.

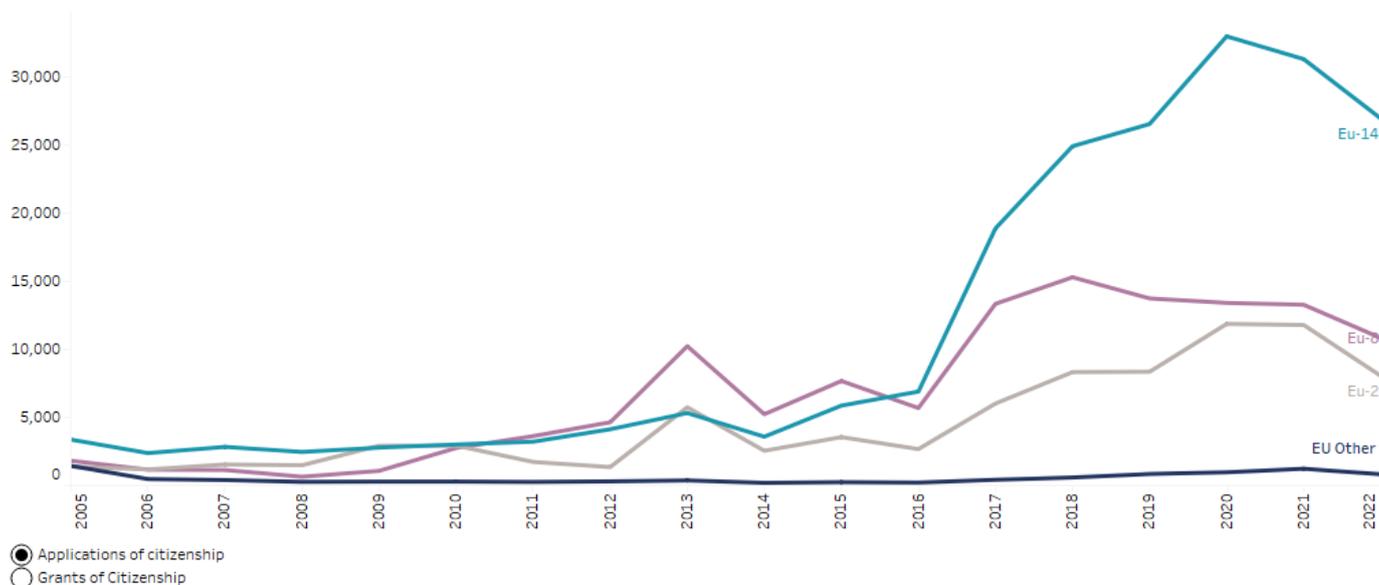
There are various possible reasons why EU citizens have been less likely to become UK citizens than people from non-EU countries (Figure 1). EU citizens may have felt more secure in their immigration status because of the protections offered by EU law, and thus felt that becoming a citizen was [not necessary](#). Barriers in the process may have played a role: all people applying for citizenship must already have proof of their permanent status, but until recently the process for most EU citizens to get such a document was quite complex (See the [Migration Observatory](#) briefing on EU citizens already living in the UK before Brexit). Most EU citizens will also not have had any contact with the immigration system until recently (due to their application to the EU Settlement Scheme), whereas non-EU citizens will generally have already had to submit multiple applications (for entry visas, renewals and indefinite leave to remain), making them more familiar with the process.

After the Brexit referendum, the number of EU citizens granted UK citizenship increased sharply from previously low levels (Figure 2). However, EU citizens represented only 35% of all successful applications in 2021, while they made up 63% of foreign national residents in the same year, according to Census data (Figure 1). The number of citizenship applications from EU citizens levelled off and then declined from around 2020 onwards.

Figure 2

Applications and grants of UK citizenship by previous nationality, 2005 to 2022

Only EU citizens



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the Home Office Immigration Statistics, tables Cit_D01 and Cit_D02, YE June 2023



Interestingly, Irish citizens applied for citizenship in larger numbers following the referendum, even though they retain rights to live and work in the UK despite Brexit. Citizenship applications from Irish nationals tripled from 2015 to 2021 (173 to 515 applications), albeit from a low base (Home Office Immigration Statistics, table cit_d01, YE June 2023).

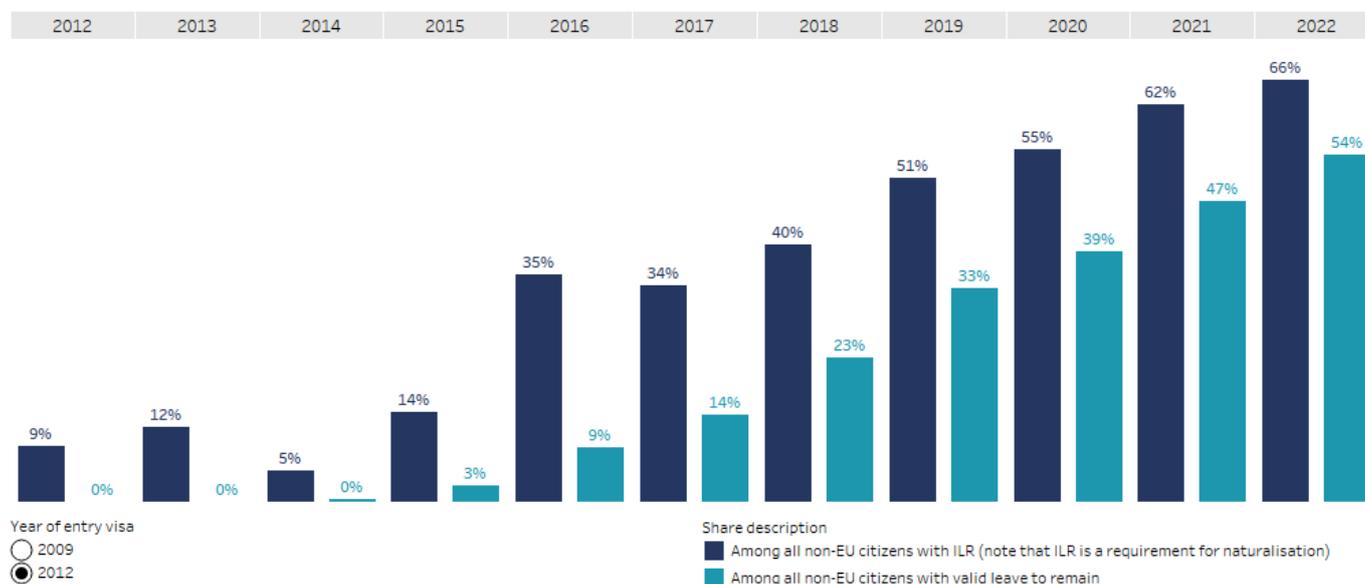
The majority of non-EU migrants who are still in the UK 10 years after getting their initial visa will have become British citizens

The longer people have lived in the UK, the more likely it is that they will become UK citizens. Most non-EU migrants with more than ten years of residence are British citizens (Figure 3). For example, among non-EU citizens granted entry visas in 2009, 51% had become UK citizens by the end of 2019 and 66% by the end of 2022 (Figure 3). The shares are higher (64% by 2019 and 74% by 2022) if we exclude people who do not have ILR and thus will usually be ineligible for citizenship.

Figure 3

Successful applications for UK citizenship among non-EU citizens, 2009 to 2022

Only migrants whose entry visa was issued in 2009 or 2012



Source: Migration Observatory, analysis of the Home Office Migration Journey, table MJD01 YE June 2023

Note: citizenship status is measured at the end of each year, i.e the '0-1 years' category gives the status at the end of December for anyone granted a visa during the course of that calendar year. Some people with ILR or valid leave to remain may no longer be present in the UK.



Migrants who come to the UK on a family visa obtain citizenship faster than those entering with a work or a study visa, but after eight years, workers were the most likely to have become citizens

The time it takes to become a citizen varies depending on how the person qualified to come to the UK initially (Figure 4). This is primarily because the route to permanent settlement or ILR (required before citizenship) is longer for some groups, such as international students. For example, among people granted entry visas in 2009 and whose visas had not expired six years after entry, family migrants tended to become British citizens the fastest, with 50% already UK citizens by the end of 2014 (Figure 4). For people on work and study visas, acquiring British citizenship took longer: only 15% and 3% of those who moved on work visas and student visas, respectively, were UK citizens six years after their entry visa.

After the sixth year of residence in the UK, the gap in citizenship acquisition between family migrants and work visa holders narrowed significantly: 49% became British citizens seven years after their first visa compared to 56% of those on a family visa. In fact, by 2018, the share of UK citizens was 67% among those who moved to the UK with a work visa and still had a valid leave, while this percentage was 63% among those who came with a family visa (Figure 4).

Although workers take longer to become citizens than family migrants, they are more likely to acquire citizenship after obtaining ILR. Among people who came to the UK in 2009 on a family visa and still had a valid leave to remain in 2022, 36% had ILR but not citizenship, while this percentage was only 19% among those who came on a work visa (data from Home Office Immigration Statistics, tables MJ_D01 and MJ_D02, YE June 2023).

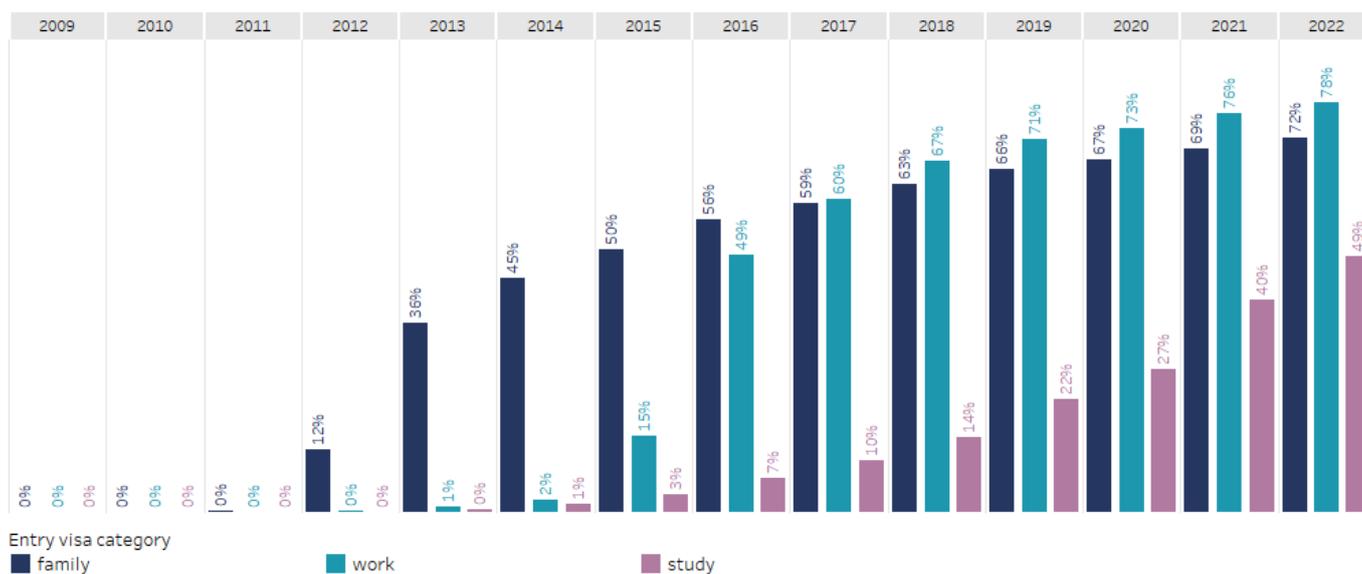
One reason for this difference may be the financial costs of naturalisation. Family migrants often must pay all their visa-related expenses until they get permanent residency (ILR), whereas workers might have some of these costs covered

by their employers. By the time family migrants obtain permanent status, naturalisation fees could deter them from applying for citizenship. Another reason may be the introduction of language requirements for citizenship applications in 2013. [Research](#) conducted in EU countries has demonstrated that people who migrate for family reasons tend to be particularly affected by language criteria in naturalisation processes. Until 2010, the UK did not require people to demonstrate English proficiency when applying for a family visa (See the Migration Observatory Briefing on Family Migration to the UK). Therefore, family migrants who were not proficient in English may have entered the country before 2010 and faced obstacles in applying for citizenship once the language requirements were introduced in 2013.

Figure 4

British citizenship registrations among non-EU citizens with a valid leave to remain, by entry visa category and year, 2009 to 2022

Only main applicants whose entry visa was issued in 2009



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the Home Office Migrant Journey, table MJ D01, YE June 2023

Note: figures exclude non-EU nationals with expired visas; some people with ILR or valid leave to remain may no longer be present in the UK



Evidence suggests that becoming a citizen may help migrants’ economic and social integration, especially among those from disadvantaged groups

In policy discussions, citizenship is often seen as something that can help migrants to integrate. For example, the [Home Office Indicators of Integration Framework](#) describes citizenship as an “important bedrock to the integration of any individual in a society”.

However, there is an ongoing political debate about the role of naturalisation on migrants’ integration. On one hand, some have argued that it should not be too easy to become a citizen, or that citizenship policy should be a ‘reward’ for integration. For example, [a government-commissioned](#) review of citizenship in 2008 suggested that “the requirements for the acquisition of citizenship should stimulate integration and civic participation as well as constitute proof that those processes are taking place to existing citizens”.

On the other hand, there is some evidence that becoming a citizen has a positive impact on economic and social integration, suggesting that high barriers to citizenship could make integration harder. For example, it has been [found](#) that naturalisation improved the labour market outcomes of many groups of foreign nationals in France, Germany, Sweden and the United States, particularly for the most disadvantaged.

A [study from Switzerland](#) shows positive effects of naturalisation on social integration (measured by a combination of factors such as planning to stay permanently, local club membership and reading local newspapers), with the largest effects for traditionally marginalised migrant groups. [Another study](#) found that, in Germany, faster access to citizenship improved the economic situation of migrant women, and that migrants with shorter residency requirements for citizenship were more likely to invest in language and vocational training. However, such findings are not universal. For example, [research](#) has found that becoming a citizen did not increase measures of political participation among migrants in the UK.

Non-EU migrants from high-income countries are less likely to become UK citizens. When they do, they are more prone to hold dual citizenship than other nationalities.

Among the top countries of origin for non-EU citizens, people from higher-income countries are in general less likely to be UK citizens than those from lower-income or politically unstable countries. For example, among non-EU citizens granted entry visas for work, family or study between 2007 and 2010 and who were settled (i.e. with ILR) in the UK by 2020, over 75% of those from Iraq and Afghanistan were citizens, compared to 22% of those from South Korea, 46% from the US and 46% from Canada (and despite the fact that these three countries allow dual nationality) (Figure 6). Although other factors could be behind these figures, such as migrants’ year of arrival (Census information is not available for passports held and year of arrival for each country of birth), this pattern is consistent with [trends from EU countries](#). [Studies](#) have found that migrants from lower-income countries perceive the relative benefits of taking on a nationality from a high-income such as the UK, to be higher. For example, some citizenships provide greater travel freedom, or the ability to live in a country with high economic prosperity, stability, and human development.

Figure 5

Relationship between migrants’ country of birth GDP per capita and UK citizenship acquisition

GDP per capita 2021 (in constant 2015 US\$) and share of non-EU migrants with UK citizenship 10-13 years after receiving entry visa



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Migrant Journey data, YE June 2023 and World Bank data 2021 (2021 GDP per capita in constant 2015 US\$). Note: data refers to non-EU citizens who were granted a visa between 2009 and 2012/ People with temporary leave to remain or expired visas are excluded given that ILR is required to apply for citizenship in most cases. Countries with fewer than 10 people with ILR by the end of 2022 and countries for which 2021 GDP is not available are excluded. GDP per capita is gross domestic product divided by mid-year population.

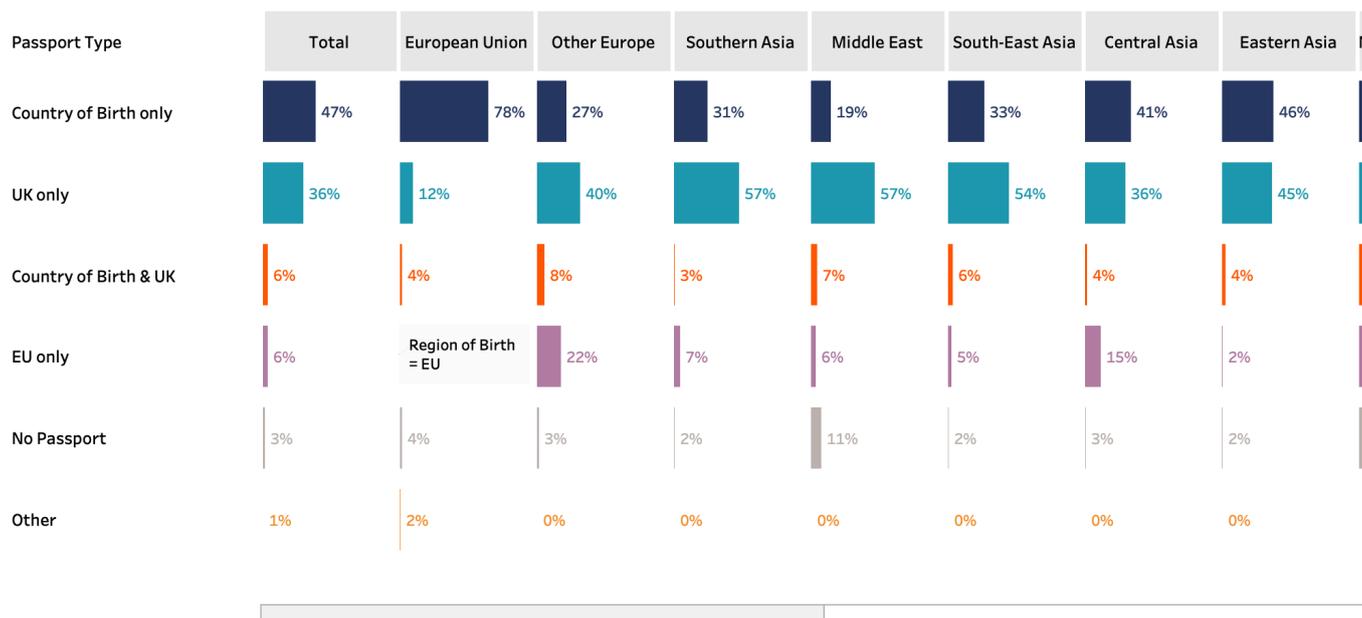


Those born in higher-income regions are also more likely to report holding two passports. For instance, in 2021, 25% of migrants born in North America had dual citizenship. In contrast, only 8% of migrants born in Eastern Africa reported having two passports. This can be, again, due to the perceived advantages of keeping the citizenship of countries with higher levels of human development. These figures can also be influenced by national laws in migrants' countries of origin that forbid dual or multiple citizenship. In addition, the perceived value or stigma attached to specific passports can influence how people answer the Census question.

Figure 6

Population by region of birth and passports held

England and Wales only



Notes: For the Total figures, the category "EU passport" includes only migrants born outside the EU who have an EU passport. The EU-born migrants who have an EU passport are counted under the category "passport of the country of birth". The Irish passports have a separate category in the Census, but for the purpose of this analysis, they have been considered as EU passports. It is important to note that the Census data only provides information on the region of the passport and not the passport of the country of birth. Therefore, individuals who have a passport from their region of birth have been classified as having a passport from their country of birth. For instance, if someone was born in India and has a passport from Southern Asia, they will be considered to have a passport from their country of birth, which is India.

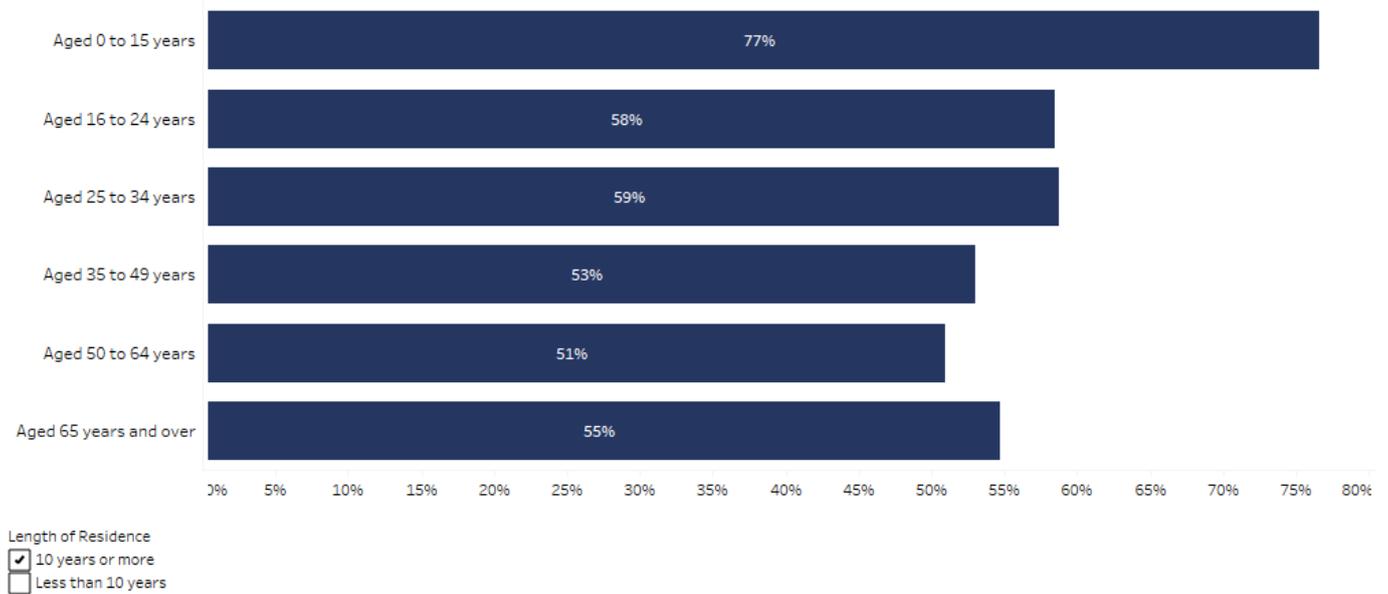


People who moved to the UK as children are more likely to be British citizens, and this trend is particularly clear among the EU born

Both EU- and non-EU-born migrants who moved to the UK when they were children (especially those who moved at age 15 or younger) are more likely to be UK citizens than people who moved later. This is partly because people who moved to the UK when they were children are more likely to have been in the UK for longer than those who moved at older ages. Figure 7 takes this into account and presents the share of UK nationals among migrants who came to the UK at different ages, including only those who have been in the country for over ten years. This confirms [previous research](#) showing that migrants who migrate at younger ages are more likely to become citizens.

Figure 7

Share of foreign born who are UK citizens, by age at migration, 2021
England and Wales only



Source: Migration Observatory Analysis of the 2021 England and Wales Census.

Note: passports held data are self-reported. Respondents may be entitled to a passport for being a citizen but not hold one. The year of arrival to the UK is based on the most recent arrival.



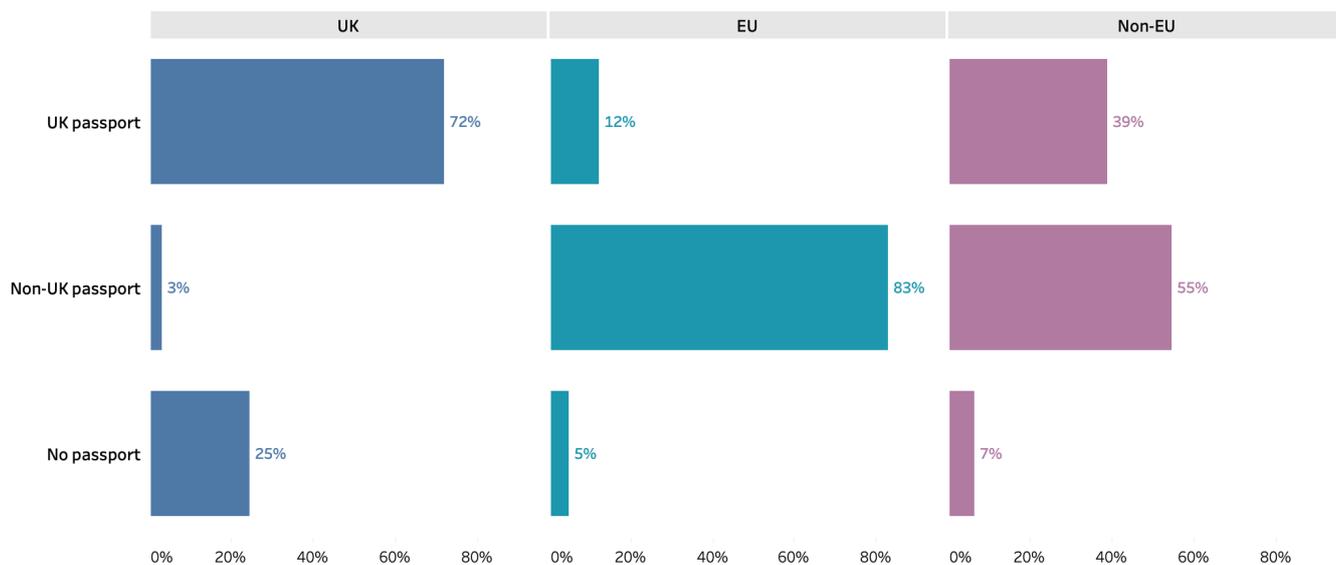
In 2021, there were an estimated 840,000 non-UK citizen children (under 17) living in the UK, of whom approximately 350,000 were born in the UK

UK-born children are not necessarily automatically British nationals. See the Home Office [Registration as a British citizen: children](#) for detailed information about the process of becoming a UK national for minors. In 2021, there were an estimated 840,000 children under the age of 17 who were not British citizens living in the UK, the majority of whom were EU citizens (Figure 8). Among children born in EU countries, an estimated 95% (300,000) did not have a UK passport. Among non-EU-born children, the share was lower: 61% or 230,000.

Figure 8

Children’s nationality by country of birth, 2021

Children aged 16 and under, England and Wales only



Source: Migration Observatory Analysis of the 2021 England and Wales Census.

Note: Includes only children aged 16 or younger. Passports held data are reported by parents/guardians. Respondents may be entitled to a passport for being a citizen but not hold one.



Note that there are a significant number of people in the UK who do not hold a UK passport, despite being citizens. This is particularly common among children, who may not have been outside the country and required a travel document. The Census data does not provide information on children (and people in general) who are British citizens, but who do not hold a UK passport (See more information on the Understanding the Evidence section).

Citizenship fees and language and integration requirements may create barriers to becoming a UK citizen

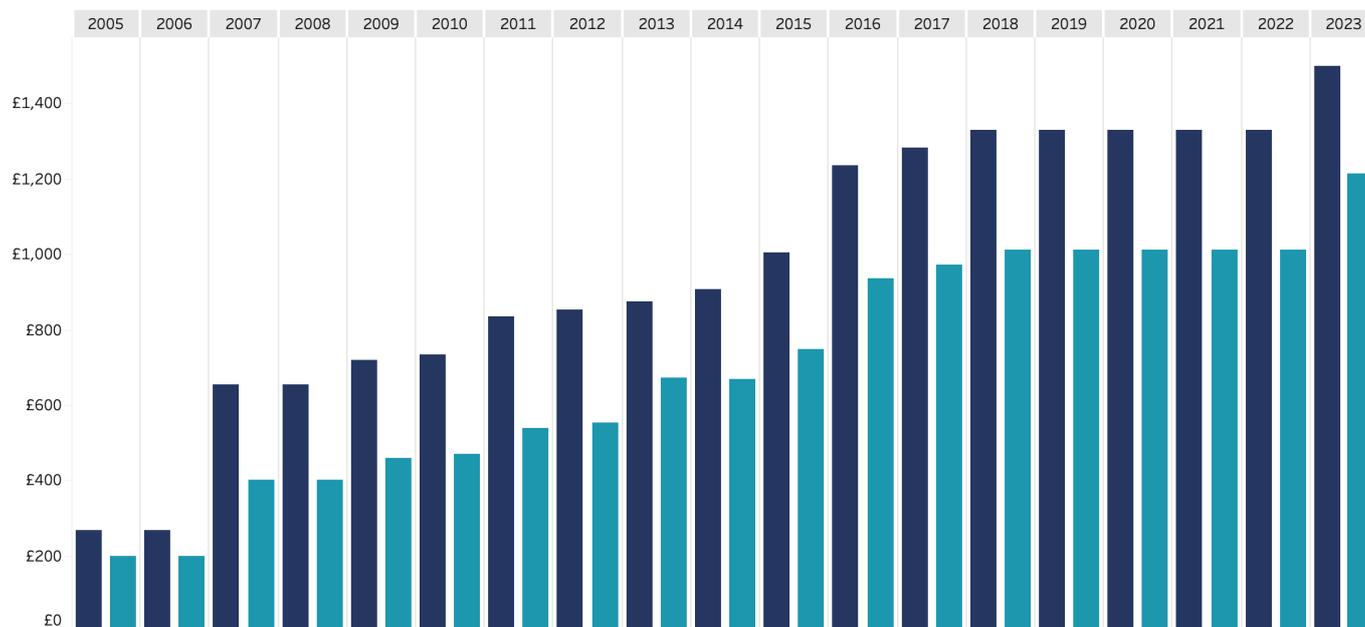
Citizenship fees in the UK are high compared to many other countries. According to the Migrant Integration Policy Index (2020), non-EU citizens in the UK who want to settle permanently or become British citizens face among the highest costs in the developed world. Since 2023, the cost of an adult citizenship application is £1580, up from £268 in 2005 (Figure 9). The Home Office estimated that the processing cost for each application was £505 as of October 2023. The ‘surplus’ generated from these fees is used to fund other components of the immigration system.

The effects of fees on the citizenship application rate is hard to measure, although a 2019 report by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI) documented concerns among lawyers, civil society and applicants about the impacts of high costs of citizenship registration for children in particular (ICIBI, 2019; see also Ealing Law Centre, 2014). EU citizens in the UK [have cited](#) the fee as a significant deterrent, and [evidence](#) from the United States (where fees are lower) has found that fee subsidies significantly increased application rates.

Figure 9

Naturalisation fees, 2005 to 2023

Adults and children



Source: Immigration and Nationality Fees Regulations on legislation.gov.uk
 Note: includes £80 citizenship ceremony fee for adults.

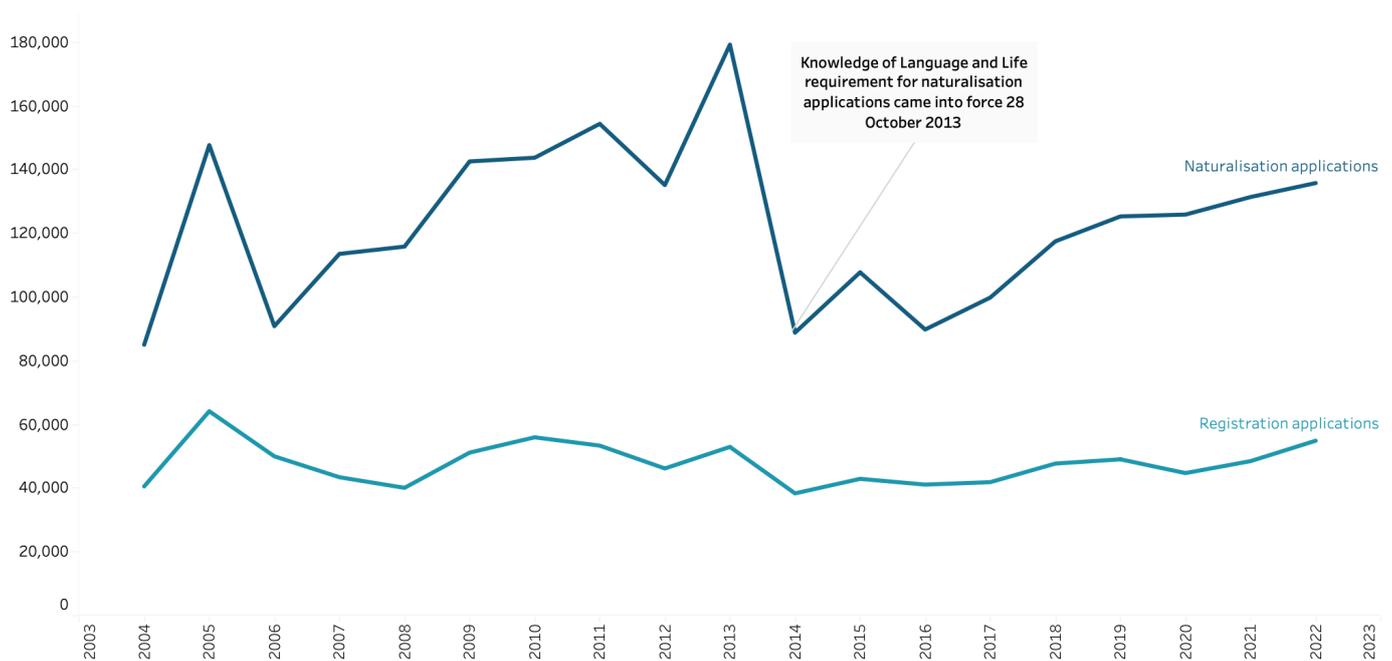


[Research](#) has found that language requirements and so-called ‘civic integration tests’ (e.g. Life in the UK test or the Civic Integration Exam in the Netherlands) also affect people’s ability to naturalise. For example, applications for naturalisations spiked in 2013 (179,000) and fell dramatically in 2014 (89,000)– a decrease of 50%–, most likely as a consequence of the introduction the knowledge of language and life requirements on 28 October 2013 (Figure 10). The decrease in naturalisation applications from 2013 to 2014 was particularly pronounced among applicants for certain nationalities, e.g., Nepal (-81%), Philippines (-79%), Bangladesh (-75%), Afghanistan, Turkey, or Somalia (-67%) (Home Office Immigration Statistics June 2023, table cit_d01).

A [recent study](#) on migrants to Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden found that after two decades in the destination country, the cumulative naturalisation rates of those migrants vary widely (+80% in Sweden, 67% in the Netherlands, and 37% in Denmark. The authors partly attribute these country differences to the language requirements and integration tests introduced in the Netherlands and Denmark –but not in Sweden–, which particularly affected migrants with lower levels of education.

Figure 10

Citizenship applications (naturalisations and registrations), 2003 to 2022



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics December 2021, table cit_d01, YE June 2023



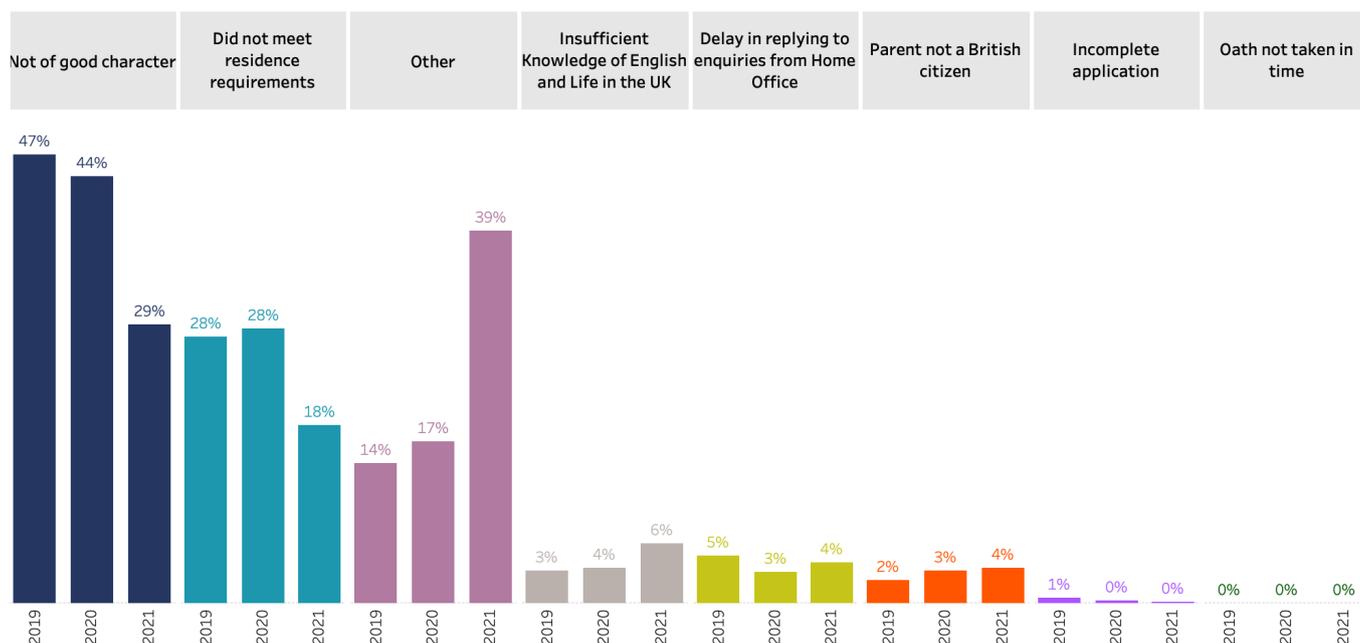
Around 2.5% of citizenship applications were refused in 2021

In total, around 4600 or 2.5% of citizenship applications were refused in 2021 (excluding withdrawn applications). The most common individual reason for refusal was not being of ‘good character’ (Figure 11). [According to the Home Office](#), applicants for citizenship aged 10 or older will not be considered of good character if they have been involved in crime, have not paid their taxes, have been deliberately dishonest or deceptive in their dealings with the UK government, have breached immigration law or have been deprived of their citizenship before.

Refusals data do not tell us what the main barriers to citizenship are for non-citizens in the UK; this is because we do not know how many foreign citizens have not applied because they believe that they will be refused or cannot afford the fees.

Figure 11

Refusals of citizenship, by reason and year, 2019 to 2021



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration statistics, table cit_04, YE Jun 2023

Note: excludes withdrawn applications and applications that are *rejected* (rather than *refused*) without substantive consideration because they were deemed invalid (e.g. because they were incomplete). In some cases, there may be multiple reasons for refusal. Data in this table are based on the main reason for refusal, as assessed by the caseworker. 'Residence' includes applicants who have not lived lawfully in the UK for the required period, have been in breach of the immigration laws, have been absent from the UK for more than 450 days or more than 90 days in the last 12 months.



In Q3 2020, the pass rate for the 'Life in the UK' test was 80% (Home Office, 2020, table LUK_01). This figure by definition only includes those who took the test and does not show whether people were deterred from applying for citizenship because they believed they would be unable to pass the test.

Non-EU migrants in the UK are more likely to be UK citizens than non-EU migrants in EU-14 countries are to be citizens of those countries

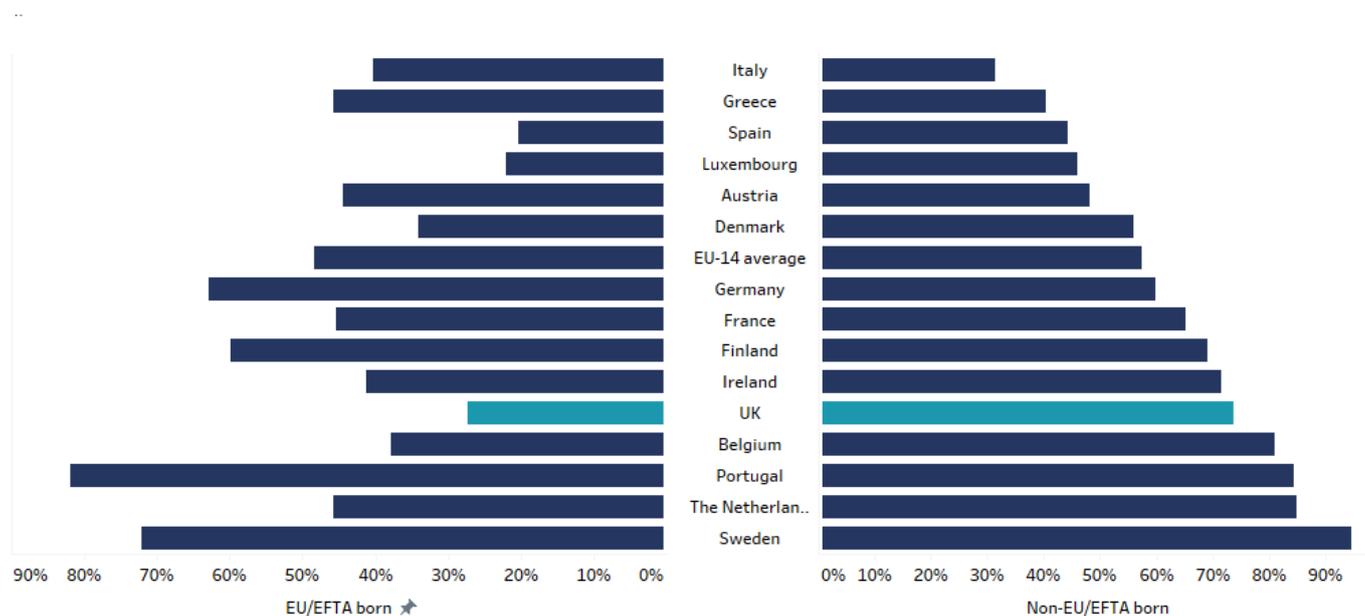
Non-EU/EFTA born migrants are more likely to be UK citizens (74% in 2019) than those in EU-14 countries are to be citizens of those countries (58%), when considering migrants with more than 10 years of residence. By contrast, EU/EFTA-born migrants are less likely to be citizens in the UK compared to EU/EFTA-born migrants living in EU-14 countries (Figure 12).

In general, countries with inclusive citizenship policies such as Sweden or Portugal tend to have higher shares of naturalised migrants (Figure 12). Favourable citizenship policies are typically considered to include factors like the recognition of dual nationality, automatic citizenship for those born in the country of residence, no more than 5-year residence requirement, free and flexible language courses and tests, low citizenship application fees, and security of status once granted. Note, however, that the national composition of EU and non-EU migrants varies across EU-14 countries and the UK, and this could also explain some of the differences.

Figure 11 does not distinguish between the foreign-born who naturalised (i.e. acquired their country of residence citizenship by fulfilling certain requirements) from those whose citizenship has been recognised by descent (i.e. because their parents or ancestors were born in that country). In the UK, citizenship by descent is only possible for one generation. In other countries such as Germany, however, many 'ethnic' German communities living in the former Eastern bloc and the Soviet Union have been granted German citizenship automatically. This could explain the high share of EU-born German citizens in Germany (64%), which is slightly above the non-EU born (60%).

Figure 12

Share of foreign-born country nationals who are citizens of the country where they reside, by country of residence and region of birth, 2019



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the EU Labour Force Survey 2019

Note: the EU-LFS does not distinguish between foreign-born residents who naturalised (acquired their country of residence citizenship by fulfilling certain requirements) from those who acquired the citizenship by ancestry.



Evidence gaps and limitations

There are important limitations to the available information on citizenship. As noted above, the England and Wales 2021 Census did not inquire about citizenship but instead asked which passports people held. However, dual citizens, UK-born people, and refugees are particularly likely not to hold a passport from a country in which they are citizens. For this reason, the Census potentially underestimates the rates of dual citizenship. It also provides poor estimates on the number of children who were born in the UK and who are not UK citizens. Additionally, the Census only reported the first ‘other’ (non-UK) passport mentioned by respondents, and it is unclear which passports people are more likely to report first.

Available data sources for the UK do not tell us when a person became a citizen (e.g. the year of naturalisation) or how they became a citizen (e.g. by descent or residence in the UK), which makes it harder to research the effects of becoming a citizen on individuals and families.

It is also very difficult to measure the impacts of specific policies related to naturalisation – for example, how many people are deterred from becoming a citizen because of the fees or language requirements. While qualitative research suggests that these policies could have an important impact, only a [few studies](#) have been able to produce a quantitative estimate of the effects.

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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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www.compas.ox.ac.uk

About the authors

Mariña Fernández-Reino

Senior Researcher, The Migration Observatory
marina.fernandez-reino@compas.ox.ac.uk

Madeleine Sumption

Director, The Migration Observatory
madeleine.sumption@compas.ox.ac.uk

Nuni Jorgensen

Researcher, The Migration Observatory
nuni.jorgensen@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

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