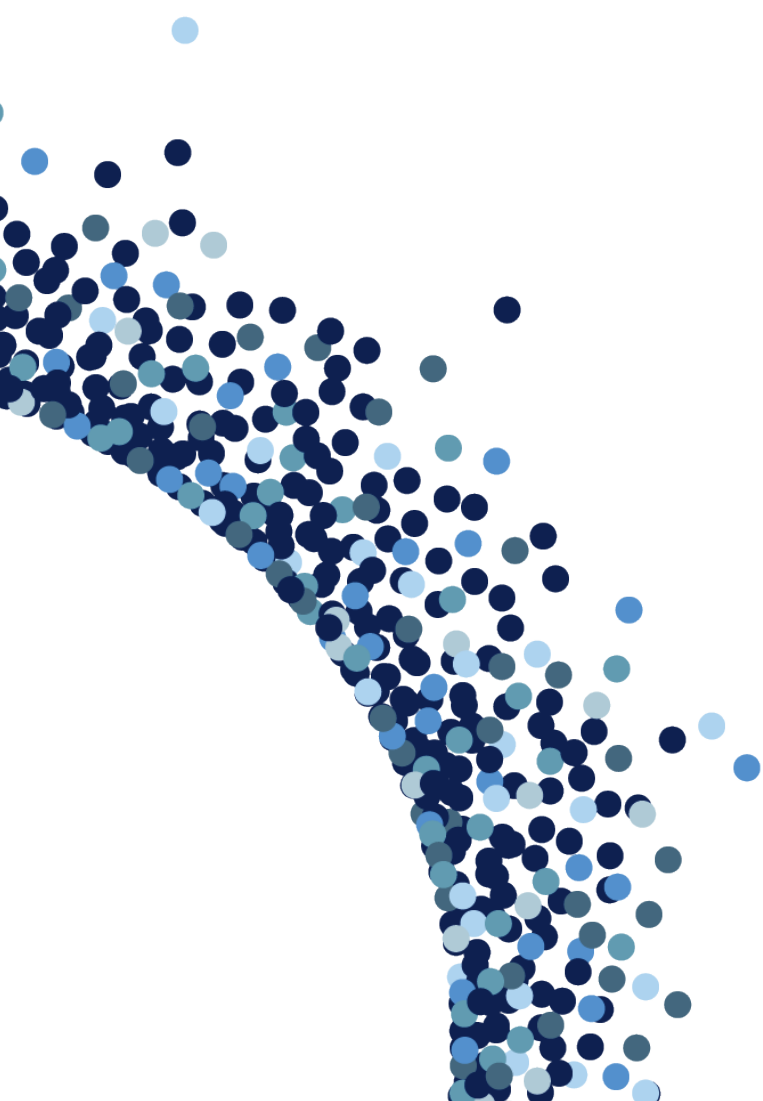# BRIEFING

Where do migrants live in the UK?

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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

The most popular destination in the UK among migrants is London, where they constitute 40% of the region's population.

Non-EU migrants outnumber EU migrants in all regions of the UK except for Northern Ireland.

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

Family migration was the largest category in all regions except for London and Northern Ireland, according to survey data from 2022.

All regions have experienced rapidly rising net international migration since 2021, with the largest relative rise in the South West.

Since Brexit, the size of the non-EU workforce has surpassed the EU workforce in all UK regions except Northern Ireland.

Post-Brexit, EU student enrolments declined across the UK, with London and Scotland hardest hit, while rapidly rising non-EU enrolments more than offset the decline.

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

Understanding the evidence

The word 'migrant' is used differently in different contexts. In this briefing, we use the term 'migrant' to refer to the foreign-born, regardless of whether they have subsequently become UK citizens. Where relevant, we also provide statistics for foreign passport-holders as distinct from the foreign-born categorisation. For a discussion of the terminology, see the Migration Observatory briefing Who Counts as a Migrant: Definitions and their Consequences.

The data in this briefing are taken from eight sources: the 2021 England and Wales Census, the 2021 Northern Ireland Census, the 2022 Scotland Census, the Office for National Statistics' (ONS) Annual Population Survey (APS), ONS Population Estimates, HM Revenue and Customs payrolled employments data tables, Higher Education Statistics Agency data on student enrolments, and Home Office Immigration Statistics.

Scotland conducted its latest census in 2022, a year later than the rest of the UK. Census figures for the UK as a whole are obtained by summing up 2021 data from England, Wales, and Northern Ireland with 2022 data from Scotland. Although some inconsistencies arise from the use of data from different years and hence care is needed when interpreting the results, these are the most accurate figures available on the UK's migrant population.

The APS is based on an ONS survey of households across the UK and provides detailed information on the characteristics of people living here, including whether their reason for coming to the UK was work. It has some important limitations, however. Some people are excluded, such as residents of communal establishments like hostels. Because the APS is a sample survey, the estimates come with margins of error. This means that small differences between numbers or percentages may not be statistically significant – that is, they may not reflect real differences in the population.

ONS mid-year population estimates report the most detailed and consistent estimates of population size and change for England and Wales in a time-series format. The estimates for 2012 to 2021 have been revised in light of the 2021 Census in England and Wales. The estimated resident population of an area includes all people who usually live there, whatever their nationality. People arriving into an area from outside the UK are only included in the population estimates if their total stay or intended stay in the UK is 12 months or more. Visitors and short-term migrants (those who enter the UK for 3 to 12 months for certain purposes) are not included. The components of change provided in the file relate to the usual resident population only and will not show, for example, short-term migrants as part of the international migration flow. Similarly, people who leave the UK are only excluded from the population estimates if they remain, or intend to remain, outside the UK for 12 months or more.

HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) compiles payrolled employments data using Pay As You Earn (PAYE) Real Time Information (RTI) records and the Migrant Worker Scan (MWS). These sources offer timely estimates of employees on payroll, helping to track employment levels, wage trends, and economic shifts. The data encompasses all payrolled employments receiving remuneration within the PAYE RTI system during the reference period, including instances where individuals are on paid leave. However, it excludes non-payrolled sources such as self-employment. Nationality is taken from HMRC's MWS. This is the nationality reported by individuals at the point of National Insurance number registration. If an individual has subsequently naturalised or changed nationality, it will not be reflected in these statistics. Notably, payrolled employment counts cannot be directly compared with payrolled employee counts. A payrolled employee may have multiple payrolled employments, therefore payrolled employment counts will be higher, following similar trends.

Data on international students in UK higher education come from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). HESA categorises students by 'domicile': a person's place of permanent residence before they started their course. This means that some non-UK nationals are UK-domiciled students, and some UK nationals are domiciled overseas. Data are sometimes restricted to "newly enrolled" students, to give an indication of annual inflow. In 2021, HESA changed its data to make it more comprehensive. This means that statistics after 2021 are not strictly comparable with those for previous years.

Lastly, data on the location of asylum seekers, resettled refugees, and holders of other humanitarian statuses come from the Home Office. The data on asylum seekers only captures those who are recipients of government support (known as 'Section 4', 'Section 95' or 'Section 98' support) and will exclude any asylum claimants who are self-supporting. For resettled refugees, location data are provided for those who arrived between 1 January 2014 and 31 December 2023 and refer to people's initial receiving local authority, which they may later leave. The location of Ukrainian and Afghan nationals offered a humanitarian visa is based on data on arrivals under the Homes for Ukraine and ACRS/ARAP schemes, respectively.

The most popular destination in the UK among migrants is London

Based on UK census data from 2021 (2022 in Scotland), London emerges as the most popular destination for migrants (Figure 1). Although less than 10% of the total UK-born population lived in London, the city was home to one-third of the total foreign-born population in the country. Northern Ireland, the North East, and Wales were the least popular destinations for migrants.

Figure 1

Distribution of populations across UK regions
By country of birth or passport held, 2021*
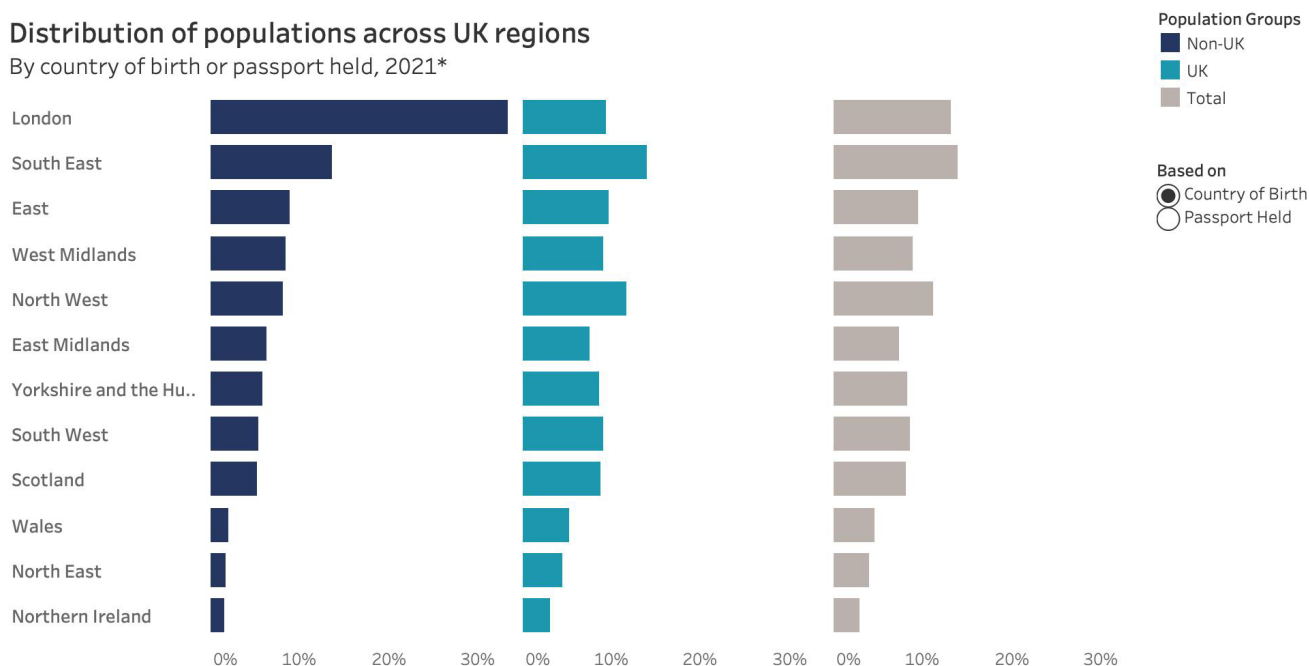
Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the 2021 Census for England and Wales, 2021 for Northern Ireland and the 2022 Census for Scotland.

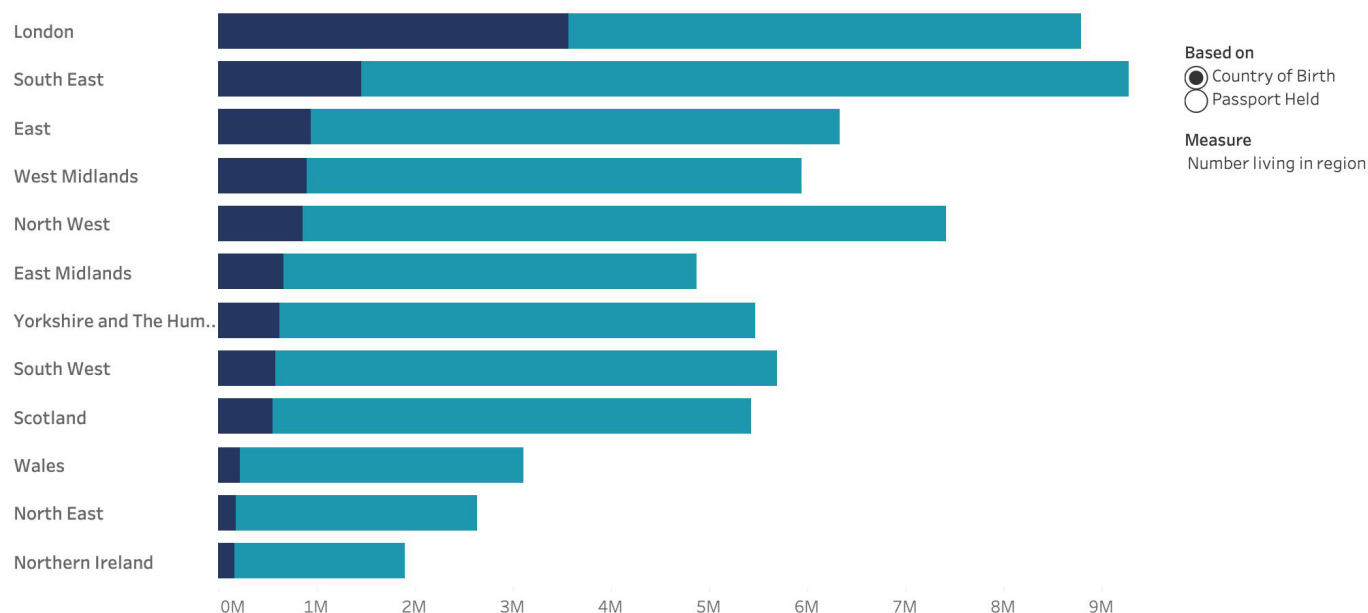*Figures for Scotland calculated with census data collected in 2022.

The share of migrants out of the total of each regional population largely mirrors the trends in regional popularity (Figure 2). Migrants constituted just over 40% of London's population in 2021. In terms of numbers, this was more than double the migrant population in the South East, a region with a slightly greater total population than that of London.

Figure 2

Size and share of migrants in UK regional populations
By country of birth or passport held, 2021*

Population groups
- UK
- Non-UK

Based on
- ◉ Country of Birth
- ○ Passport Held

Measure
Number living in region

Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the 2021 Census for England and Wales, 2021 for Northern Ireland and the 2022 Census for Scotland.

*Figures for Scotland calculated with census data collected in 2022.

Non-EU migrants outnumber EU migrants in all regions of the UK except for Northern Ireland

Migrants born outside of the EU far outnumber EU-born migrants across the UK except in Northern Ireland (Figure 3). In London, for example, non-EU-born migrants comprised a little over a quarter of the regional population in 2021, while EU-born migrants made up 13%.

Figure 3

Size and share of EU and non-EU migrants in UK regional populations
By country of birth or passport held, 2021*

Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the 2021 Census for England and Wales, 2021 for Northern Ireland and the 2022 Census for Scotland.

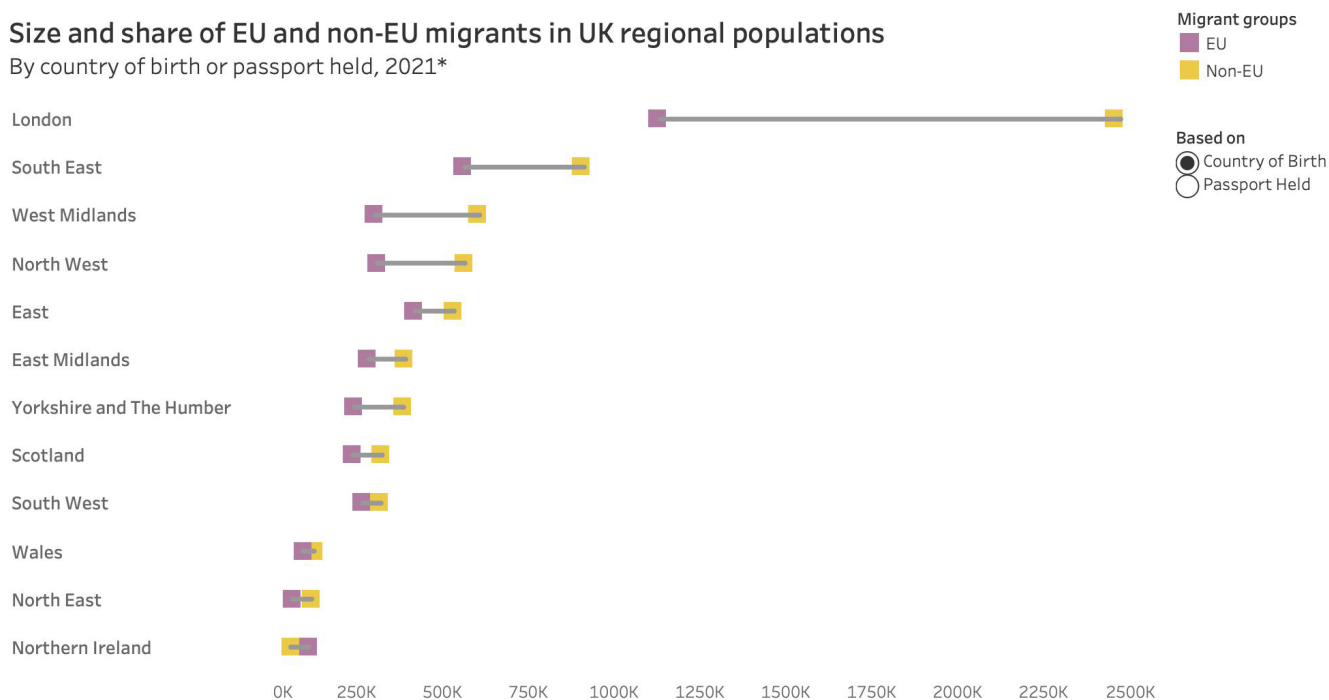*Figures for Scotland calculated with census data collected in 2022.

In most local authorities (LAs) across the UK, the EU-born population accounted for less than half of the foreign-born population in 2021/2022 (Figure 4). This was not true for Northern Ireland, where almost all LAs had more EU-born than non-EU born migrants, or for Yorkshire & the Humber and the East Midlands, where most LAs had more EU-born than non-EU born migrants.

Figure 4

EU and non-EU migrant populations in lower tier local authorities
By country of birth or passport held, 2021*

Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the 2021 Census for England and Wales, 2021 for Northern Ireland and the 2022 Census for Scotland.
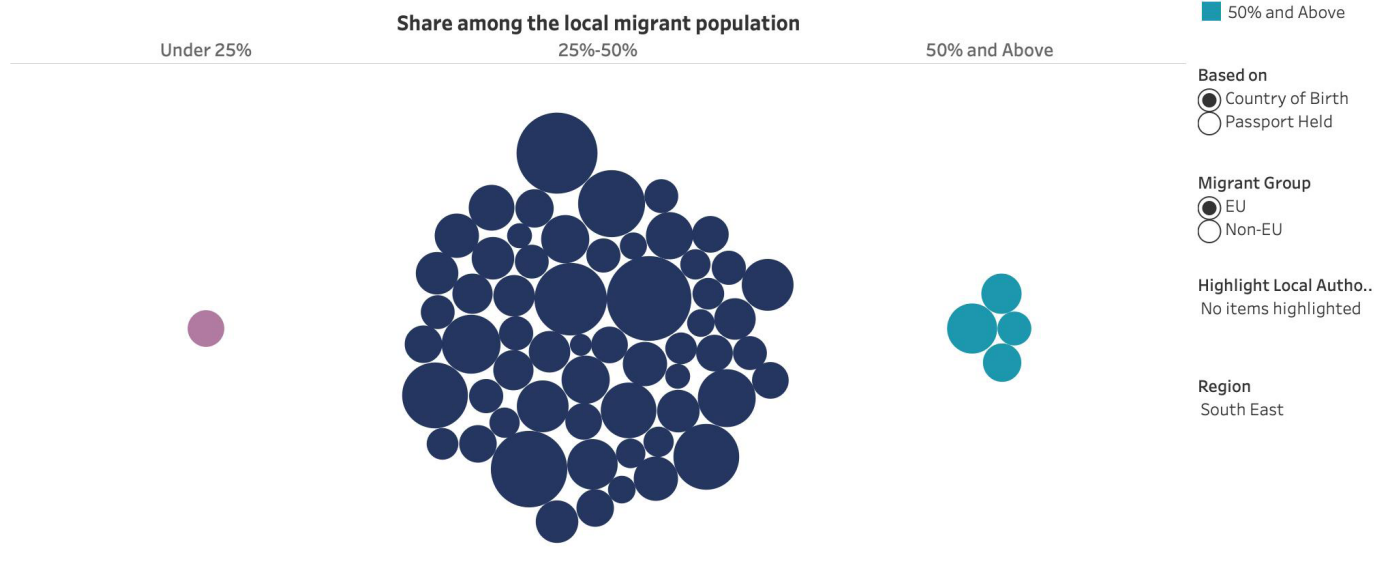
The size of each bubble reflects the selected migrant population in the given local authority.

*Figures for Scotland calculated with census data collected in 2022.

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

The EU and non-EU populations are unevenly distributed across the UK. In 2021, more than one-third of the UK's non-EU-born population was living in London, and the West Midlands was home to 10%. Both rates were notably higher than that of EU-born migrants (Figure 5). Conversely, Northern Ireland, the South West, and the East were all relatively more popular destinations for the EU-born.

Figure 5

Distribution of EU and non-EU migrants across UK regions
By country of birth or passport held, 2021*
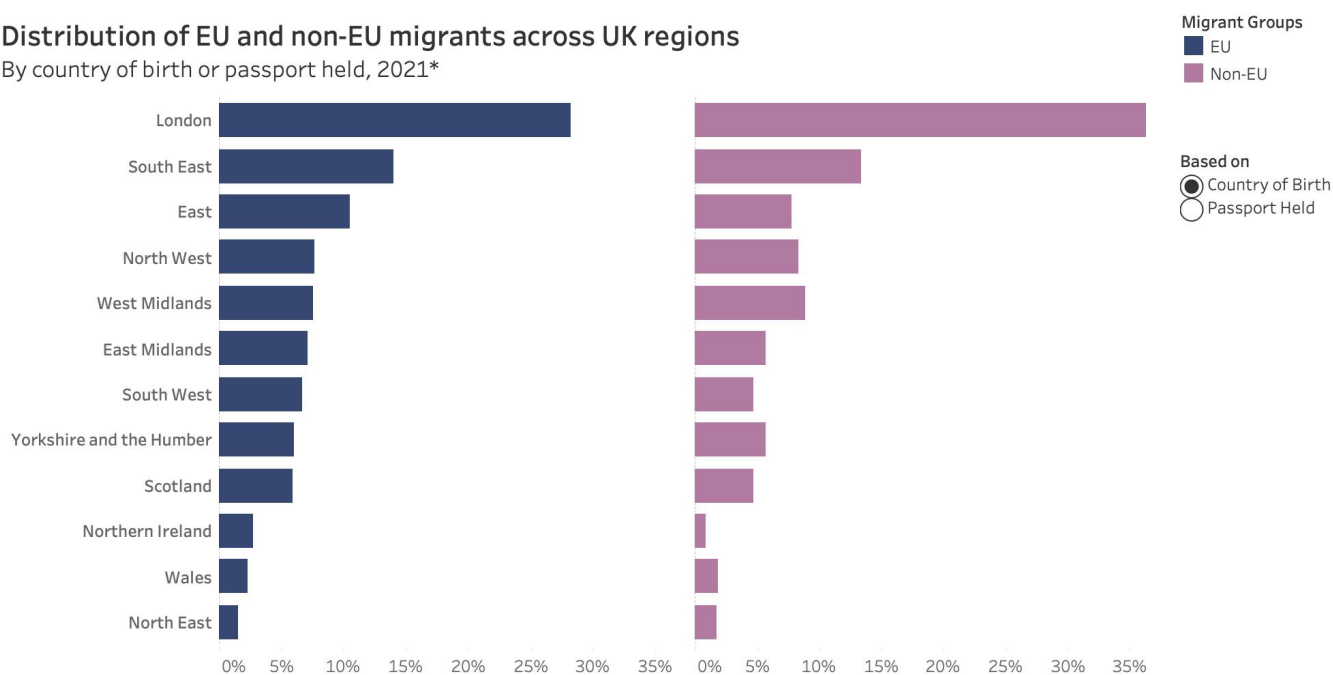
Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the 2021 Census for England and Wales, 2021 for Northern Ireland and the 2022 Census for Scotland.

*Figures for Scotland calculated with census data collected in 2022.

Family migration was the largest category in all regions except for London and Northern Ireland, according to survey data from 2022

According to the findings of the Annual Population Survey from 2022, family migration was the most common reason to come to the UK, followed by employment reasons (Figure 6). The APS's categorisation of migration reasons is different to that used by the ONS, which distinguishes between family migration and dependants of people on, for example, work or study visas.

Taking into account migrants from all backgrounds, family migration was the largest category in all regions except for London and Northern Ireland. Non-EU migrants were more likely to have migrated for family reasons than EU migrants in all regions except for the North East and Northern Ireland. Overall, the East was the region most representative of UK-wide averages for migration reasons for the foreign-born.

Northern Ireland was the region most liekly to attract employment migration and the only UK region where both EU-born family migrants and EU-born employment migrants outnumber all non-EU-born migrant groups.

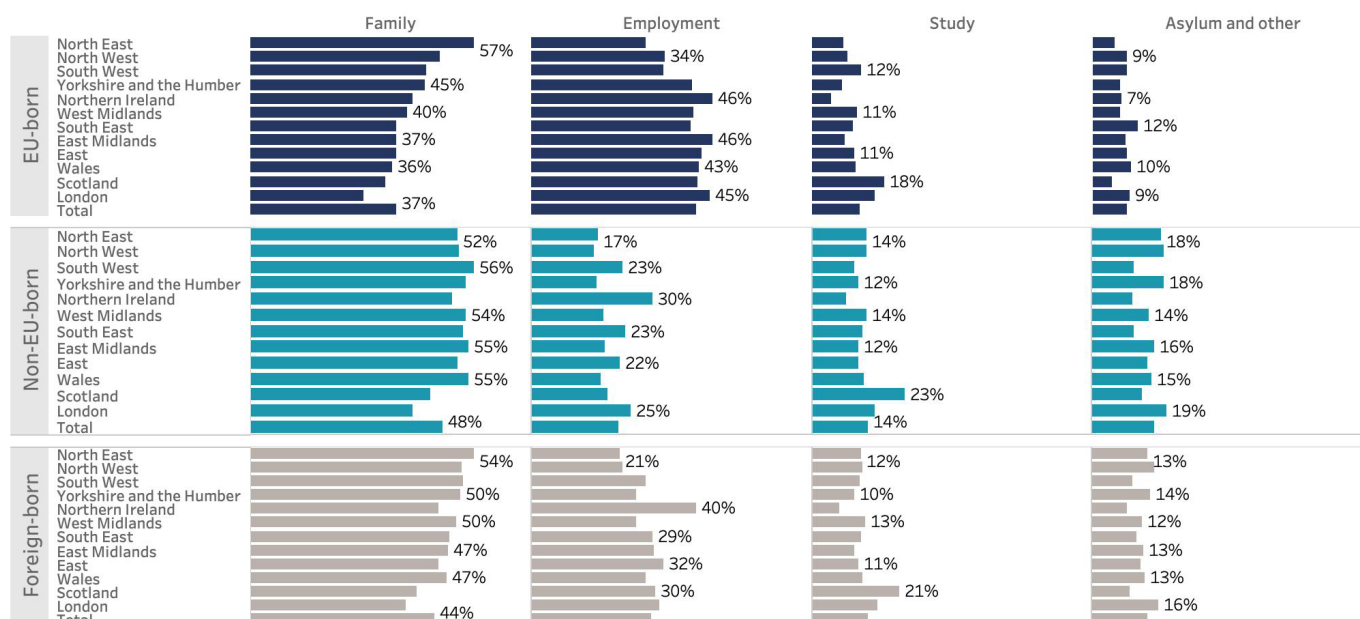Scotland and London had the highest shares of migration for study.

Non-EU-born asylum migrants were overrepresented in London and the North West compared to the rest of the country.

Figure 6

Share of main reason for migration in UK regions
By migrant group, 2022

		Family	Employment	Study	Asylum and other
EU-born	North East	57%	34%		9%
	North West			12%	
	South West				7%
	Yorkshire and the Humber	45%	46%		
	Northern Ireland			11%	12%
	West Midlands	40%			
	South East		46%		
	East Midlands	37%		11%	
	East		43%		10%
	Wales	36%		18%	
	Scotland		45%		9%
	London	37%			
	Total				
Non-EU-born	North East	52%	17%	14%	18%
	North West		23%		
	South West	56%		12%	18%
	Yorkshire and the Humber		30%		
	Northern Ireland			14%	14%
	West Midlands	54%	23%		
	South East	55%		12%	16%
	East Midlands		22%		
	East	55%			15%
	Wales			23%	
	Scotland		25%		19%
	London	48%		14%	
	Total				
Foreign-born	North East	54%	21%	12%	13%
	North West				
	South West	50%		10%	14%
	Yorkshire and the Humber		40%		
	Northern Ireland	50%	29%	13%	12%
	West Midlands				
	South East	47%	32%		13%
	East Midlands			11%	
	East	47%	30%		13%
	Wales			21%	
	Scotland				16%
	London	44%			
	Total				

Source: Migration Observatory Analysis of the APS, 2022

Since Brexit, the size of the non-EU workforce has surpassed the EU workforce in all UK regions except Northern Ireland

Looking at HMRC payroll data is one way of tracking change in the foreign-born workforce in different parts of the UK. London's share of jobs held by non-UK nationals declined from 35% in December 2020 to 32% in December 2023. This follows the introduction of the post-Brexit immigration system in January 2021 and may have been driven by high levels of recruitment into healthcare roles, such as care work.

All UK regions have seen a growth in non-EU employments since the post-Brexit system came into force (Figure 7). In absolute terms, the biggest increases between December 2020 and December 2023 were in London (711,000) and the South East (388,000), while the biggest relative increases were in Northern Ireland (+133%) and the North East (+128%).

Figure 7

Payrolled employments in UK regions
By industrial sector and nationality, 2014-2023

Industrial Sector
Total

Nationality
■ EU
■ Non-EU
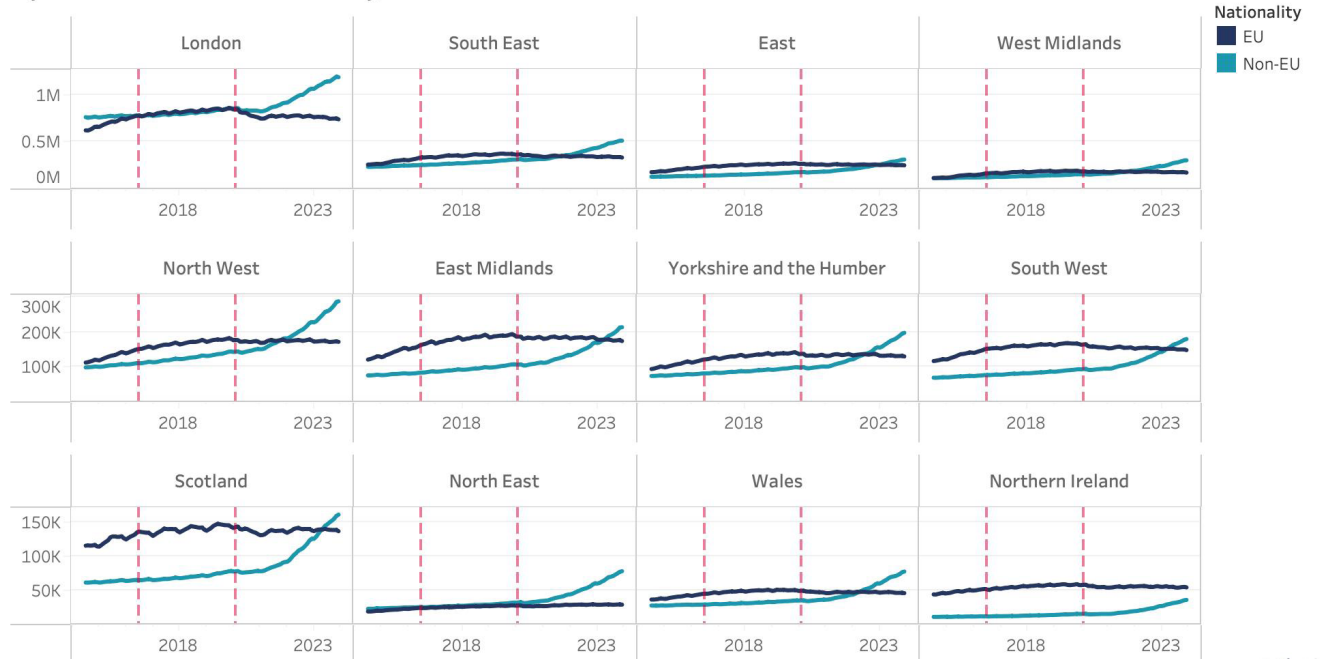
Source: Migration Observatory analysis of HM Revenue and Customs payrolled employments data tables for January 2014 - December 2023

The industrial sectors are based on the UK Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) codes. Nationality is based on self-reporting by individuals at the point of National Insurance number registration.

Among EU employments, the opposite pattern has occurred – employments decelerated after the Brexit referendum in 2016 and then entered a period of stagnation or decline after December 2020.

In all UK regions except Northern Ireland, non-EU payrolled employments eclipsed EU payrolled employments by the end of 2023. The biggest relative gaps in employment in favour of the non-EU-born have emerged in the North East, West Midlands, and Wales.

Post-Brexit, EU student enrolments declined across the UK while rapidly rising non-EU enrolments more than offset the decline

Student enrolment data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) for the 2017/18 academic year onward further showcase the significant, widespread, and likely permanent impact of Brexit on EU migration to the UK for study. The cessation of home fee status for EU nationals for courses starting in the 2021/22 academic year coincided with a sharp and sustained fall in EU student enrolments in all regions except for Northern Ireland, and at all levels of study (Figure 10). At the same time, all UK regions compensated for losses in EU student enrolment several times over by recruiting non-EU students instead, especially at the postgraduate level.

Figure 8

Regional student enrolments in the UK higher education sector
By level of study and student permanent address, 2018-2023

Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Higher Education (HE) Statistics Agency data on HE student enrolments by HE provider and permanent address for the academic years 2018/19, 2019/20, 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23.

Statistics are aggregated for all modes (part-time and full-time) of study.

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

Asylum seekers who receive government support and housing are usually given no choice as to where they live. As of March 2024, the majority are concentrated in London, the North West, and West Midlands, with ten local authorities (LAs) hosting 22% of this population (Figure 11). This distribution is partly influenced by dispersal policies, which incentivise contractors to house people in places where accommodation is cheaper.
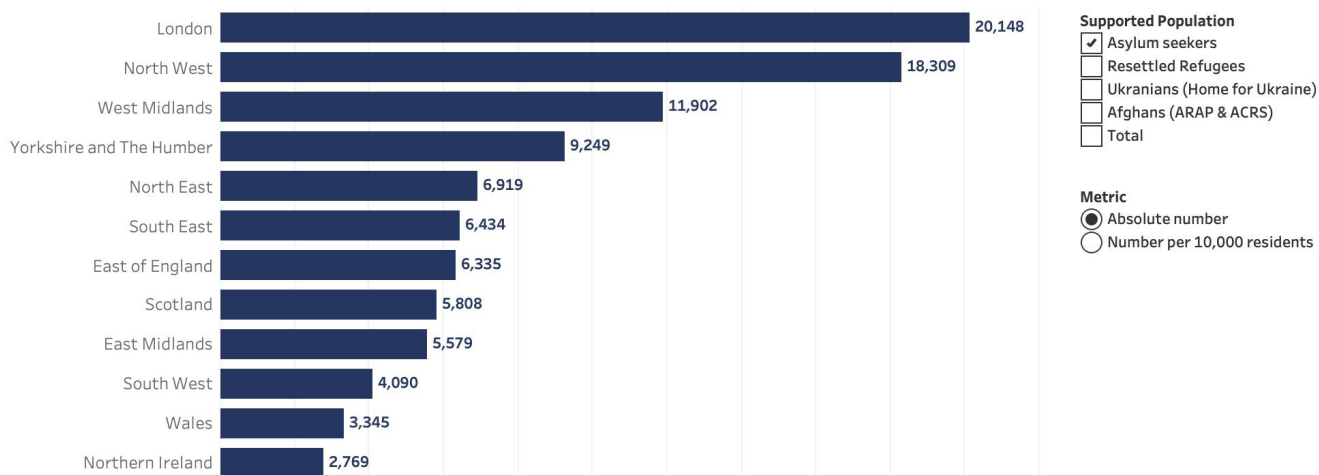
The distribution of asylum seekers contrasts with that of people who came under the Ukraine schemes, mostly under the Sponsorship (Homes for Ukraine) Scheme. The ten authorities with the highest number of Ukrainian nationals on the Home for Ukraine Schemes host only 11% of this population. This is because the scheme works around individual families' availability to support a Ukrainian citizen. The individual LAs hosting the highest number of Ukrainian nationals are located in the South West and South East regions of England: Buckinghamshire, Somerset, and Barnet. Scotland hosts more of this population than any other region of the UK (Figure 11).

Figure 9

Where do asylum seekers, resettled refugees, Afghans and Ukrainians live?

Absolute numbers and per 10,000 resident population, by population of interest, and by local authority (map) and UK region (chart), as at 31 March 2024

Select Chart
Regional Chart

Region	Value
London	20,148
North West	18,309
West Midlands	11,902
Yorkshire and The Humber	9,249
North East	6,919
South East	6,434
East of England	6,335
Scotland	5,808
East Midlands	5,579
South West	4,090
Wales	3,345
Northern Ireland	2,769

Supported Population
- ☑ Asylum seekers
- ☐ Resettled Refugees
- ☐ Ukranians (Home for Ukraine)
- ☐ Afghans (ARAP & ACRS)
- ☐ Total

Metric
- ◉ Absolute number
- ○ Number per 10,000 residents

Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Regional and Local authority data - Immigration groups (Table Reg_01) and Resettlement by Local Authority (Table Res_D01), Year ending March 2024.
Notes: Asylum seekers refer to main applicants and dependants on either Section 98, Section 95 or Section 4. Afghan nationals refer to people arriving through ARAP or ACRS. Ukrainian nationals refer to people under the Home for Ukraine visa schemes. The data include refugees who were resettled from 2014 to 2024 and refer to their initial place of residence, from which they may have since left.

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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