



BRIEFING

The UK's asylum backlog

AUTHORS: Mihnea Cuibus
Peter William Walsh
Madeleine Sumption
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COMPAS
Centre on Migration,
Policy & Society



www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk

The UK has accumulated a large backlog of asylum cases. This briefing examines what we know about the asylum backlog, its causes, and its consequences.

Key Points

The UK's initial decision asylum backlog fell to 49,000 applications by the end of 2025. That was 46% lower than the year before, and the smallest backlog since 2020.

The UK's backlog of asylum appeals almost doubled in 2025, reaching a record 80,000 applications. This was driven by a rapidly increasing number of asylum refusals.

Around 63,000 new asylum appeals were submitted in 2025, compared to 26,000 cases that were decided. Among substantive decisions, the appeals grant rate was 39% in 2025.

Around 108,000 initial asylum decisions were made in 2025 – 63% more than in 2024, and more than six times the number in 2022.

Caseworker productivity has been a key driver of changes in the backlog.

Both backlogs contribute to the high costs of the UK's asylum system. Spending reached £4.8bn in 2025, which was 12% less than the year before.

Delays in initial decision-making have eased, with most asylum applications submitted in the first half of 2025 receiving an initial decision within 6 months. Slow decisions can be a barrier to integration of successful applicants and delay removal of unsuccessful applicants.

Withdrawals fell to 13% of all initial decisions in 2025, after three years of elevated levels. Some withdrawn applicants may eventually re-enter the system.

Syrian, Afghan, and Iranian were the top nationalities among people in the asylum backlog at the end of 2025.

The UK had the fifth-largest initial decision asylum backlog in Europe at the end of 2025.

Understanding the evidence

The asylum backlog refers to the number of asylum claims awaiting a decision. There are two main asylum backlogs in the UK – the initial decision backlog, and the appeals backlog.

The initial decision backlog – the most commonly used measure – refers to asylum applications awaiting a first administrative decision from the Home Office. Data on this backlog can be found in the quarterly [Immigration System Statistics](#).

Home Office decisions can be appealed before the courts. Most appeals will relate to refused claims, though some positive decisions may also be appealed, for instance if an applicant received another form of leave instead of an asylum grant. In this briefing, we use the term appeals backlog to refer to the number of cases awaiting a first judicial decision before the First-tier Tribunal. Data can be found in the quarterly Tribunal Statistics.

Asylum backlog figures are larger if family members are included. Each asylum application requests protection for a 'main applicant', and some include requests for protection for the main applicant's partner or children, known as 'dependants'. Because only one asylum decision is taken per application, this briefing generally refers to applications rather than people – that is, main applicants only. There are, however, some circumstances where it makes more sense to speak of the number of people in the backlog, such as in discussions around the number of asylum seekers in need of accommodation.

The Home Office also occasionally published data on the asylum 'work in progress' (the 'WIP'). This is the widest measure of the backlog and refers to the total number of people in the asylum system: (1) applicants awaiting an initial decision; (2) those awaiting an appeal outcome; (3) individuals recorded as having absconded; (4) those whose claims have been treated as implicitly withdrawn due to their failure to complete an asylum questionnaire or attend a substantive asylum interview; and (5) unsuccessful asylum applicants awaiting removal from the UK. As of 30 June 2024, the asylum WIP stood at [224,742](#).

Understanding the policy

There are several different approaches to dealing with asylum backlogs:

- **Increasing the resources** dedicated to processing cases, such as increasing the number of asylum decision-makers;
- **Increasing the efficiency** of the asylum process, such as by simplifying guidance or introducing caseworker specialisation;
- **Prioritising applications** from groups with particularly high or low grant rates to make faster decisions on those cases;
- **Granting status** to people with longstanding, unprocessed claims without assessing their asylum claim.

The Home Office strategy to reduce the backlog has focused on the first three of these categories.

First, the previous government sharply increased the number of asylum caseworkers it employs. Staff numbers doubled in a year, reaching 2,500 at the start of 2024. Numbers fell to around 2,000 by the end of 2025, though they remained well above pre-2024 levels.

Second, the Home Office introduced simplified procedures for certain types of asylum applicant. In May 2023, a PACE (Prioritising Asylum Customer Experience) programme was rolled out across all asylum teams. During a pilot in Leeds in 2022, the rate of asylum decision-making increased from an average of 1.3 to 2.7 weekly decisions per caseworker.

Third, in February 2023, the Home Office introduced Streamlined Asylum Processing (SAP) in order to deal with manifestly well-founded applications more rapidly. Under the process, citizens of six countries – Afghanistan, Eritrea, Libya, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen – typically had their asylum claim determined on the basis of a completed questionnaire rather than a face-to-face interview. SAP procedures applied only to applications submitted before 7 March 2023, and the government has not provided any indication that it planned to extend it to more recent applications.

The Home Office also created a dedicated unit to process Albanian asylum claims, which increased sharply in 2022. For more details, see [Albanian asylum seekers in the UK and EU](#).

A 2020 [review](#) of asylum practices in Europe argued that fast-tracking cases that appear most and least likely to succeed could be an effective way to reduce the number of people in an asylum backlog. However, it argued that this could negatively impact applicants who are not fast-tracked if resources are diverted to more straightforward cases, leading to longer wait times for other applicants. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has also [argued](#) that where cases are fast-tracked because they are considered less likely to succeed, governments need safeguards that remove certain applicants from the 'fast track' if their cases are more complex.

In addition to the measures already implemented, some proposals to reduce the backlog involve granting status to people without full consideration of their asylum claims. This would typically be restricted to those who have been waiting a long time for a decision. For example, in 2022, Ireland granted status to all applicants who had been waiting for an asylum decision for at least two years as part of a wider regularisation programme. A UK example is the 'backlog clearance' exercise, initiated in 2006 and [continued](#) under the Coalition government after 2010, which granted status to some people with long-standing asylum claims.

How large is the UK's backlog of asylum applications?

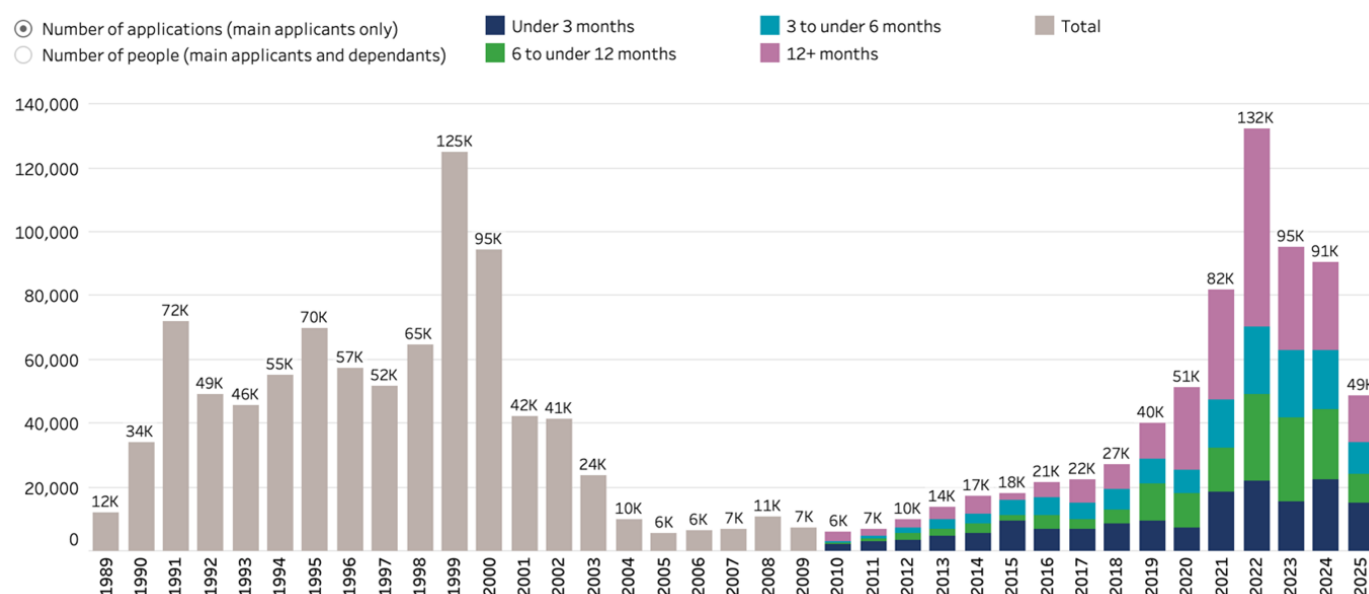
The UK's initial decision asylum backlog stood at 49,000 applications at the end of 2025, with a total of 64,000 people waiting for an initial decision on their claim. That was 46% lower than a year before, and the lowest level in more than five years. Around 49% of those waiting for an initial decision had been waiting for more than six months.

The backlog increased rapidly between 2019 and 2022, reaching an all-time high of 132,000 applications, or 161,000 people. It then fell significantly in 2023. The decline stalled in 2024 as fewer decisions were made, but accelerated again in 2025.

Figure 1

The UK's asylum backlog stood at 49,000 applications at the end of 2025 – 63% lower than the 2022 peak

Number of asylum applications awaiting an initial decision as of 31 December, by year and length of wait (main applicants only)



Sources: For 1992 to 1997: Home Office (Watson & Danzelman, 1998), Asylum Statistics United Kingdom 1997, Table 1.1; for 1998 to 2004: Home Office Statistical Bulletin, Asylum Statistics United Kingdom 2007, p. 26; for 2005 to 2009: Home Office, Control of immigration: Statistics United Kingdom 2009, p.65; for 2010 onwards: Home Office Immigration Statistics, Table Asy_D03.

Notes: Main applicants only, excluding dependants. Counts before 2012 are rounded to nearest hundred. The Home Office notes that data for 1998 are not directly comparable with figures for later years, though no explanation is provided. Data before 2010 do not include details on the duration of wait.



How large is the UK's backlog of asylum appeals?

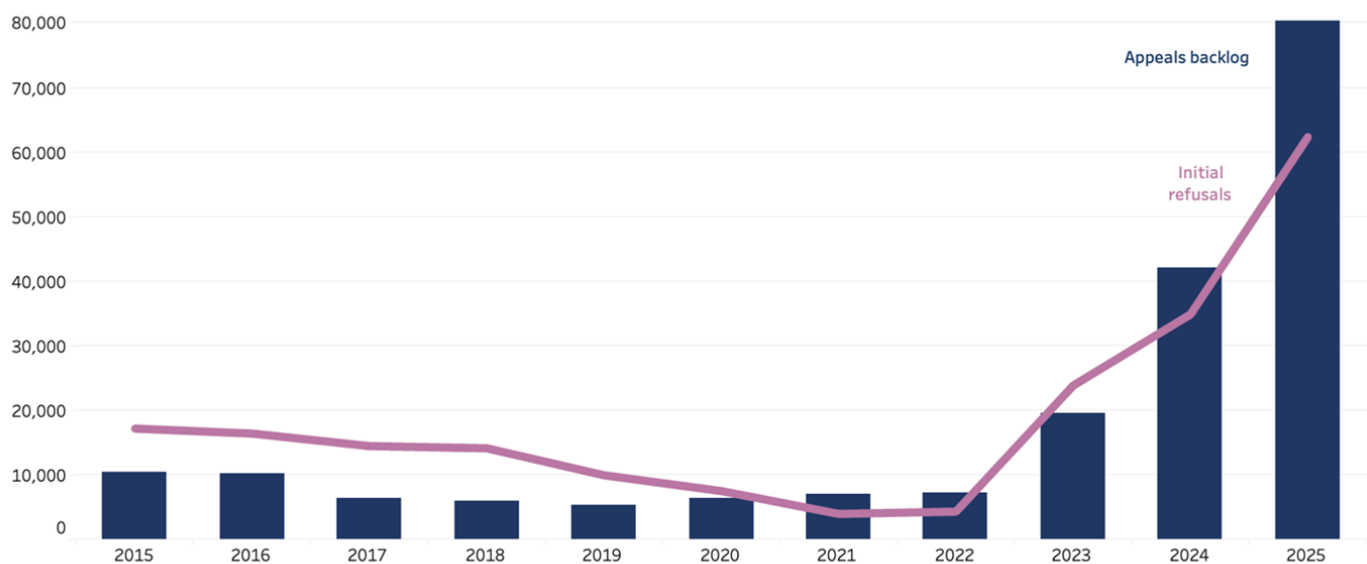
While the initial decision backlog has fallen rapidly, a large backlog of asylum appeals has accumulated in the courts. Around 80,000 asylum appeals were pending before the First-tier Tribunal at the end of 2025, with the backlog almost doubling in one year.

The increase in the appeals backlog was driven by a combination of more initial decisions and a lower asylum grant rate, meaning that the number of refusals issued in 2025 rose by 79% to 62,000 applications. Most refused asylum seekers appeal against their initial decision.

Figure 2

The appeals backlog doubled in 2025 as the number of refusals increased

Number of negative initial decisions on asylum applications, and open asylum cases before the First-tier Tribunal, as of 31 Dec



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Table Asy_D02, and Tribunal Statistics Quarterly, Table FIA_4.
Notes: Refusals include main applicants only. Appeals only include First-tier Tribunals and not higher courts.



How many asylum appeals are submitted and decided in the courts?

Almost 63,000 asylum appeals were submitted before the First-tier Tribunal in 2025, 69% more than the year before. While decision-making in the courts also accelerated, it has failed to keep up with the number of new cases. Around 39% of appeals receiving a substantive decision in 2025 were successful, overturning the initial decision of the Home Office.

One third of all appeals decided in 2025, around 8,400 cases, were withdrawn. That was a record share of appeal withdrawals, up from 15% in 2024.

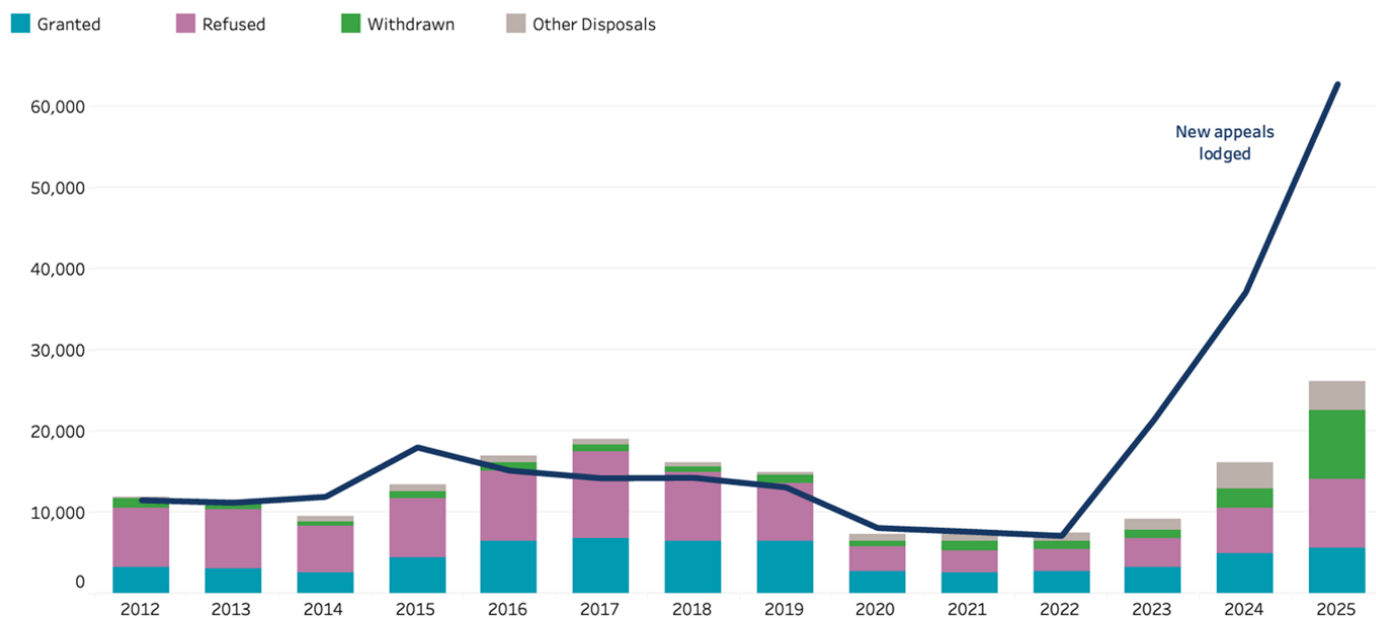
There are significant challenges in increasing the processing of asylum appeals, and there have been [several attempts](#) at appeals reform in the past. Judges and hearing rooms are needed, as well as legal representation for both the Home Office and claimants. More judges were [recruited](#) starting in 2024, and legal aid fees for asylum cases were [increased](#) in December 2025, for the first time since 1996.

In late 2025, the government also announced [plans](#) to accelerate appeals by setting up a new independent appeals body with professional adjudicators replacing judges. It said that the policy would streamline procedures to ensure all claims are dealt with in a single appeal.

Figure 3

The number of asylum appeals decided by the courts has risen much slower than that of new cases

Number of asylum appeals lodged and decided by the First-tier Tribunal, by year and outcome



Source: Tribunal quarterly statistics, Tables FIA_1, FIA_2, FIA_3.

Note: Other disposals are cases deemed invalid (for being late, missing documentation or legal grounds), those struck out (dismissed for procedural reasons), and dual lodgements.



How many initial asylum decisions are made by the Home Office?

Two factors explain changes in the size of the initial decision backlog: the number of new applications made by asylum seekers, and the number of initial decisions made by the Home Office. Until 2022, the backlog increased due to a combination of more applications and fewer initial decisions.

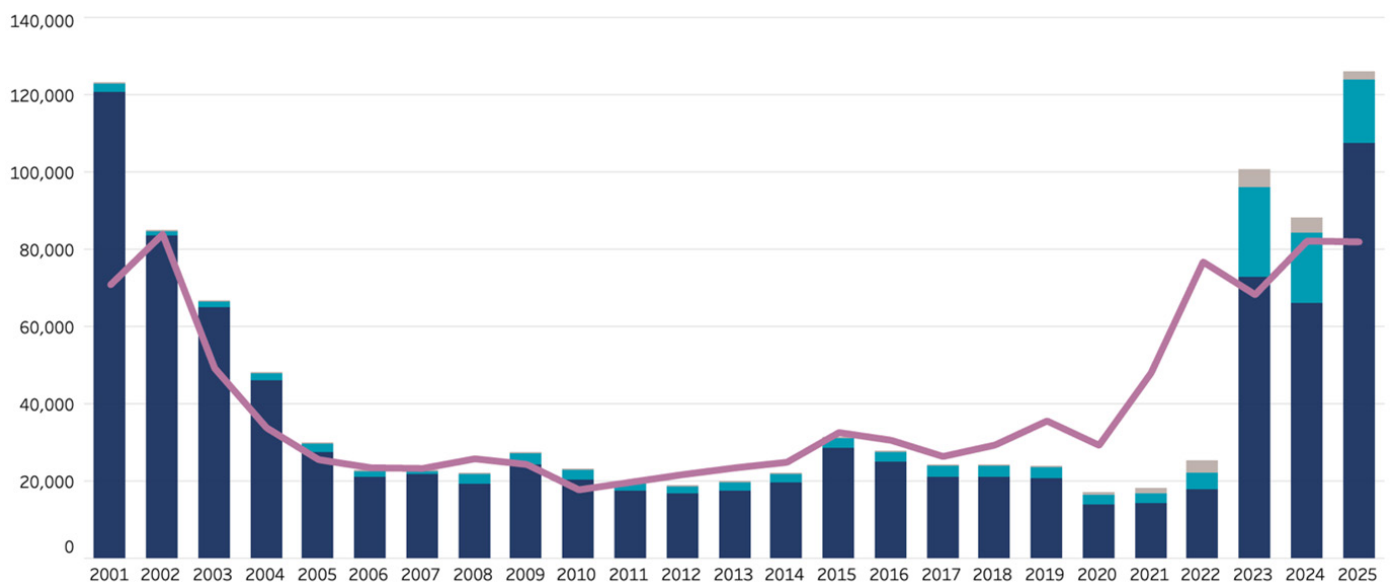
The trend then reversed in 2023 as decision-making accelerated rapidly under the previous government. The Home Office hired more caseworkers and introduced new processes to streamline processing, including deciding certain asylum cases based on a written questionnaire rather than an interview (see Understanding the Policy). The government has also withdrawn more asylum applications since 2023, which further reduced the size of the backlog (see section below).

Around 108,000 initial decisions were made in 2025, 63% more than the year before and six times more than in 2022. This is bigger than the 82,000 new asylum applications submitted in 2025, pushing down the initial decision backlog.

Figure 4

Asylum decisions exceeded new applications after 2022, shrinking the backlog

Number of **asylum applications** and initial decisions (substantive decisions, **withdrawals**, administrative outcomes), by year



Source: Home Office Immigration Statistics, Tables Asy_D01 and Asy_D02.
 Notes: Data relate to main applicants only. Substantive decisions comprise grants and refusals.



A temporary decline in decisions took place in 2024 – [attributed](#) by the Labour government to a provision in the Illegal Migration Act preventing the processing of some applications until it was repealed after the election.

How productive are Home Office caseworkers?

In response to the growing backlog, the Home Office significantly increased the number of staff processing asylum claims, known as asylum caseworkers. There were around 2,000 caseworkers employed at the end of 2025, almost four times as many as in 2021.

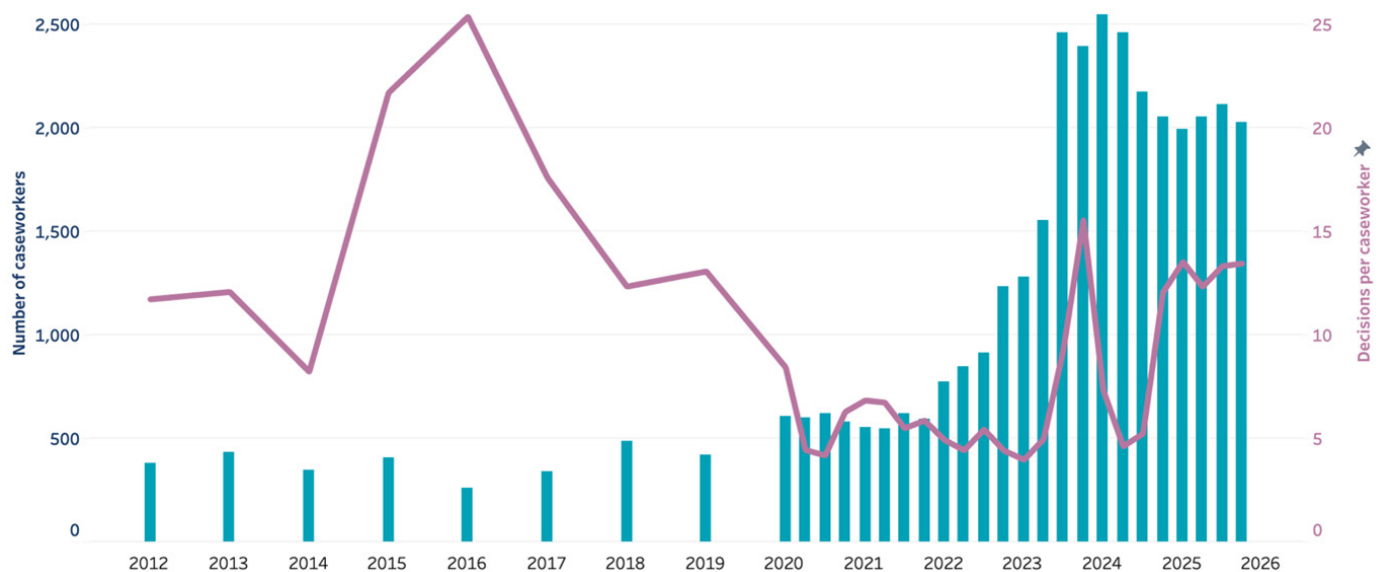
The productivity of caseworkers – defined here as the average number of substantive decisions made per caseworker each quarter – fell sharply between 2016 and 2022, contributing to backlog growth. It then partially recovered in 2023-25, except for a temporary decline during the middle of 2024, discussed above. Caseworkers made an average of 13 decisions a quarter in 2025 – twice as many as in 2022 but lower than a decade before.

Decision speed alone does not reflect caseworker performance. The quality of decisions also matters, and faster decisions may be less accurate. There is some evidence that the quality of asylum decisions may have declined in recent years. In the 2023/24 financial year, only 52% of decisions met the Home Office's own [quality control](#) standards, down from 76% two years before. An [audit](#) of asylum interviews released by the UN Refugee Agency (UNCHR) in early 2026 suggested that shortcomings in the interview process were affecting decision quality, highlighting insufficient training and a failure to fully establish key facts before a decision was made.

Figure 5

The productivity of asylum caseworkers recovered after a brief decline in 2024

Number of **asylum caseworkers** and **average number of decisions** per caseworker, by quarter



Source: UK Visas and Immigration Transparency Data, Immigration and Protection, Table ASY_04 and Home Office immigration statistics, Table Asy_D02.
 Notes: Prior to 2020, data on caseworkers were only available for the first quarter of the year. Average number of decisions was calculated by dividing the number of initial decisions made in a quarter by the number of asylum caseworking staff employed at the end of the quarter. Initial decisions include grants of protection and refusals, and exclude withdrawals.



There is no definitive explanation for the decline and subsequent recovery in caseworker productivity, though plausible explanations include:

- **Staff turnover.** Staff turnover is one factor likely to have affected caseworker productivity. Reports indicate it can take 12 to 18 months for new caseworkers to achieve full productivity, meaning a lower share of experienced decisionmakers can slow decision-making. Annual attrition increased from 26% to 39% between 2018 and 2022, though it fell back to 22% by the end of 2025. The Home Office introduced retention measures starting in 2023, including bonus payments for caseworkers who remain in their jobs for more than a year.
- **Administrative problems.** Inspections of the UK's asylum casework in [2021](#) and [2023](#) revealed persistent administrative problems in the Home Office, including low morale and inefficient IT systems. It remains unclear to what extent these issues have since been addressed. Starting in 2023, the government introduced simplified procedures for some asylum casework, and temporarily prioritised certain nationalities (see Understanding the Policy). The Home Office also imposed [individual performance targets](#) for asylum caseworkers.
- **The end of the six-month 'customer service standard'.** Until early 2019, the Home Office had an internal target – the 'customer service standard' – to process 98% of straightforward cases within six months. While the lack of a service standard may have exacerbated delays, caseworker productivity started declining three years before it was abandoned. It is possible that abandoning the service standard was partly a consequence of slower decision-making rather than one of its main causes.
- **The suspension of the Detained Fast Track process.** In 2015, a series of [legal challenges](#) forced the government to [suspend](#) an accelerated process of dealing with asylum claims called the Detained Fast Track (DFT). This allowed the Home Office to detain any adult applicant if it believed a decision on their claim was possible within 14 days. The vast majority of claims processed under the DFT were refused – around [99% between 2008 and 2010](#). These rapid decisions brought down average processing times.

While the suspension of the DFT may have contributed to the slowdown in decision-making, it is unlikely to be its primary cause. From 2005 to 2014, fast-tracked applications only made up 5-18% of yearly asylum applications.

How much does the UK spend on its asylum system?

Large backlogs increase the cost of the UK's asylum system. Asylum seekers are generally not allowed to work while their applications are pending. Those who are destitute can receive support from the government, primarily in the form of accommodation. In addition, they receive £49.18 per week in asylum support to cover food and other living costs. This is reduced to £9.95 per week for those living in hotels that provide meals.

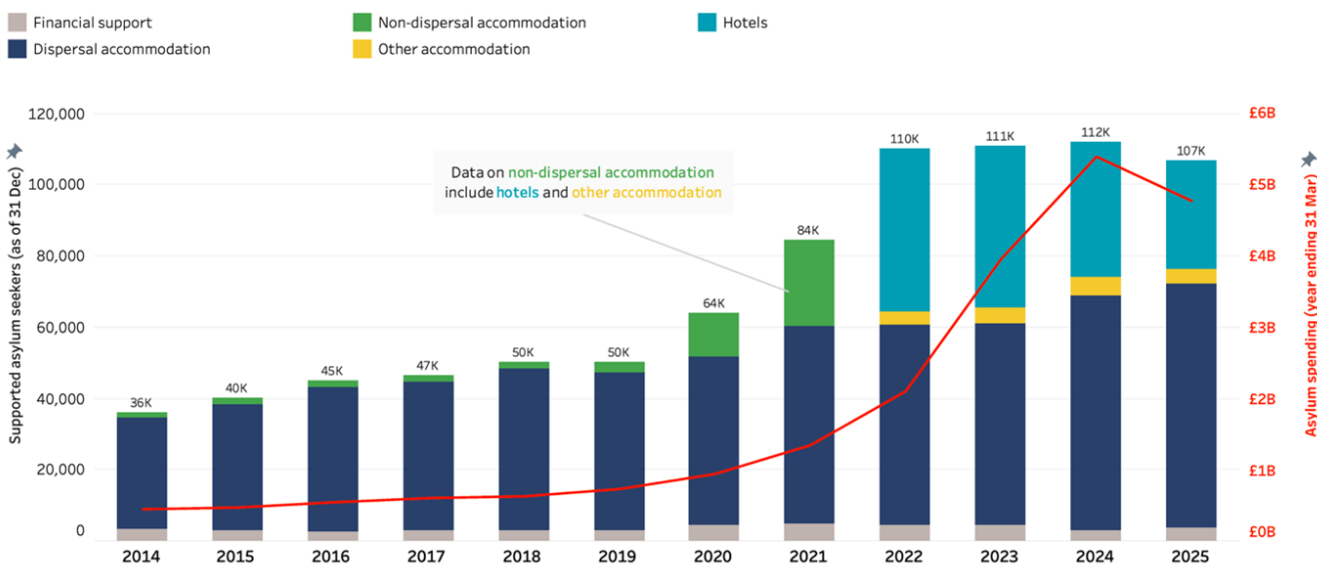
The UK spent around £4.8bn on its asylum system in the 2024/25 financial year, 12% less than the previous year, but still high by historical standards. Around 107,000 asylum seekers were receiving government support at the end of 2025, close to record levels. Since the initial decision backlog was only 49,000, this indicates that a majority of people in asylum accommodation had been refused and were awaiting appeal (or, in a smaller number of cases, removal).

When more accommodation is needed than the Home Office has available, contingency accommodation is used. In practice, this has mostly been hotels. The number of asylum seekers in hotels peaked at 46,000 in 2023 and stood at 31,000 at the end of 2025. The government has pledged to close all asylum hotels by the end of this parliament in 2029. Achieving this would require a sharp decline in the combined initial decision and appeals backlog, a meaningful expansion of longer-term dispersal accommodation, or both (for more details, see Asylum accommodation in the UK).

Figure 6

The number of supported asylum seekers remains high, though costs fell to £4.8bn in 2024/25

Number of asylum seekers in receipt of support, by type of support (as of 31 Dec)
 Government spending on the UK's asylum system (year ending 31 Mar)



Source: Home Office Immigration Statistics, Table Asy_D09, and UK Visa and Immigration Transparency data, Table ASY_04.
 Notes: Data on supported population refer to the situation on 31 December of each year. Data on costs are for financial years ending 31 March. Before 2022, non-dispersal accommodation was not broken down by subcategories, and includes hotels. Other accommodation includes initial accommodation, other accommodation, and contingency accommodation (other). Financial support refers to asylum seekers who receive financial support but no government-provided accommodation.



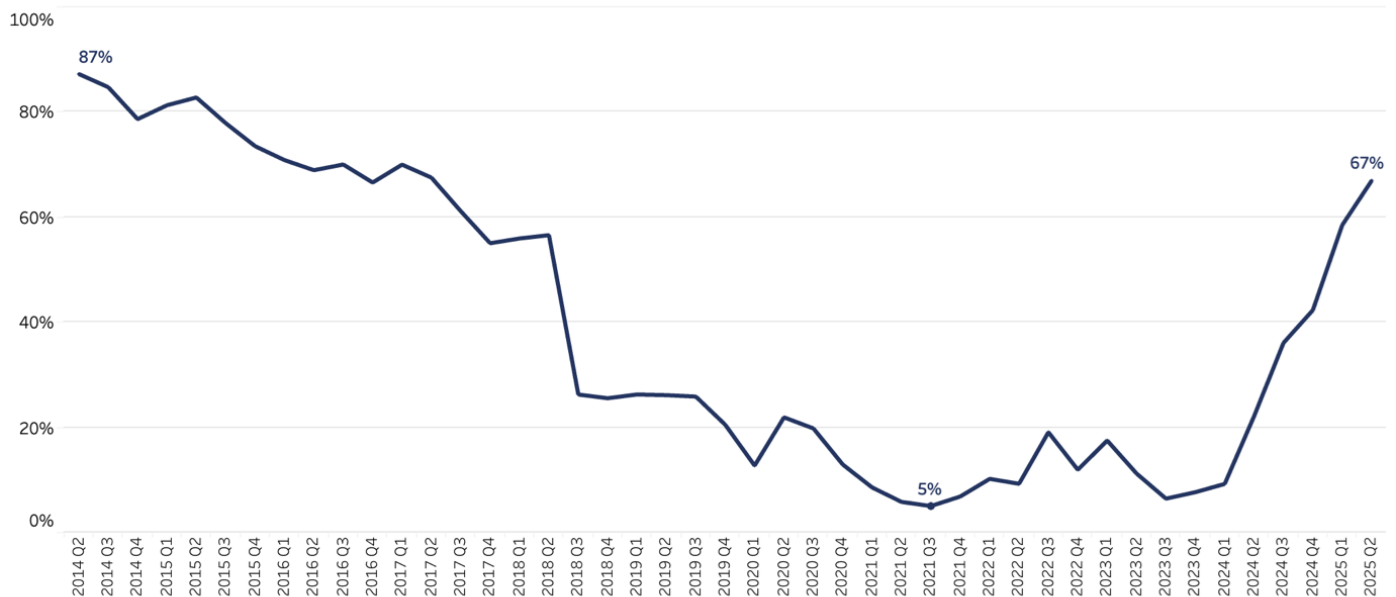
What are the consequences of long wait times for asylum seekers?

By the middle of 2025, a majority of asylum applications received an initial decision within six months. Delays eased after a period of slow decision-making between 2021 and 2023, when this share fell as low as 5%. However, processing remained somewhat slower than in 2014.

Figure 7

In the first half of 2025, most asylum applications received an initial decision within six months

Percentage of asylum applications receiving an initial decision within six months, by quarter of application (main applicants only)



Source: UK Visas and Immigration Transparency data, Table ASY_01.



Long waits for asylum decisions can have negative impacts for both asylum seekers and the government. First, research suggests that long waiting times can mean [worse long-term employment outcomes](#) for asylum seekers who go on to receive protection. Longer bans on working for asylum applicants are also associated with [lower employment rates](#) in the future among this group. Second, there is evidence that long delays in processing can [exacerbate social exclusion](#) and contribute to [mental health problems](#) among asylum seekers. In addition, long waiting times can make it [more difficult to remove](#) asylum seekers who are eventually refused protection, since there are more chances for them to form families and other ties. These ties make it more likely they will have a successful application to remain in the UK under human rights laws.

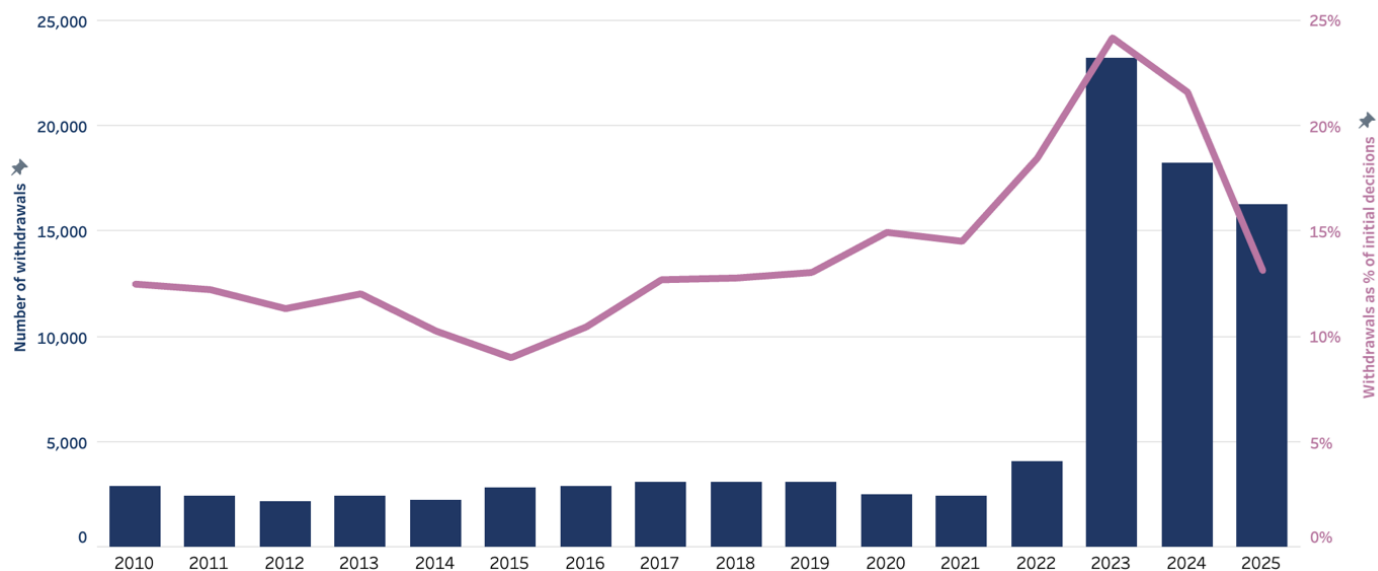
How many asylum applications are withdrawn?

A large number of applications have been withdrawn from the UK asylum system in recent years. While some applications are withdrawn at the request of the applicant, other withdrawals are made by the Home Office. This happens if certain conditions are met, such as the applicant lacking an address, or where the applicant fails to respond to letters within a five-day deadline.

Around 16,000 asylum applications were withdrawn in 2025, fewer than in the previous two years. The share of withdrawals among all initial decisions fell to 13%, returning closer to historical averages after a period of unusually high levels between 2022 and 2024, when withdrawals made up between 18% and 24% of all initial decisions.

Figure 8

Withdrawals fell to 13% of all initial decisions in 2025, after three years of comparatively high levels
 Number of withdrawals and **withdrawals as a share of all initial decisions**, by quarter



Source: Home Office Immigration Statistics, Table Asy_D02.
 Notes: Initial decisions include withdrawals, refusals, and grants of protection.



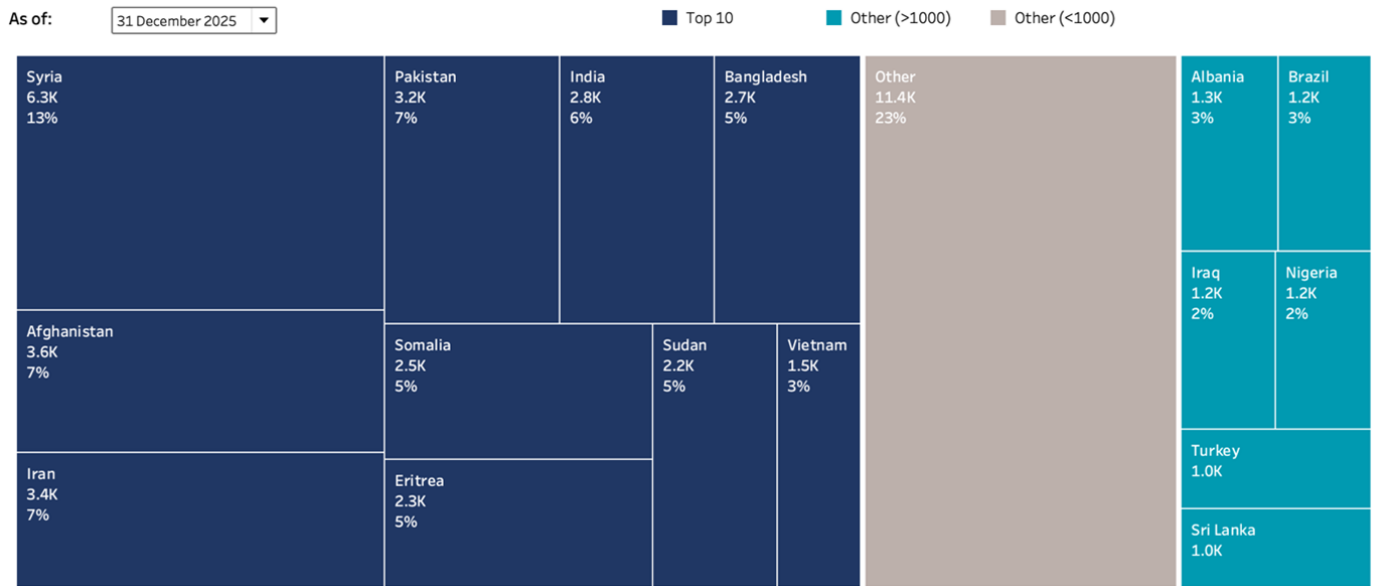
A 2023 [inspection](#) by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI) raised concerns about withdrawals, claiming that many had occurred prematurely, without adequate quality assurance checks. In the past, some people whose asylum applications were initially withdrawn later re-entered the asylum system. A 2024 [letter](#) from the Home Office showed that half of all asylum cases withdrawn in the year ending 30 September 2023 had subsequently re-entered the asylum process and had either resulted in a grant of legal status (15%), or were pending an initial decision (35%). Another 32% remained in the UK, with authorities trying to re-establish contact with them.

Which countries are asylum seekers in the backlog from?

At the end of 2025, the largest group among those awaiting an initial asylum decision were Syrian nationals, making up 13% of the overall backlog. The processing of applications from Syrians was [paused](#) for seven months after the fall of the Assad regime, and restarted in July 2025. The other top nationalities were Afghans (7%) and Iranians (7%).

Figure 9

At the end of 2025, the top three nationalities in the asylum backlog were Syrian, Afghan, and Iranian
 Number of asylum applications awaiting an initial decision, by date and nationality (main applicants only)



Source: Home Office immigration statistics, Table Asy_D03.
 Notes: Main applicants only, excluding dependants.



How does the UK's asylum backlog compare to other European countries?

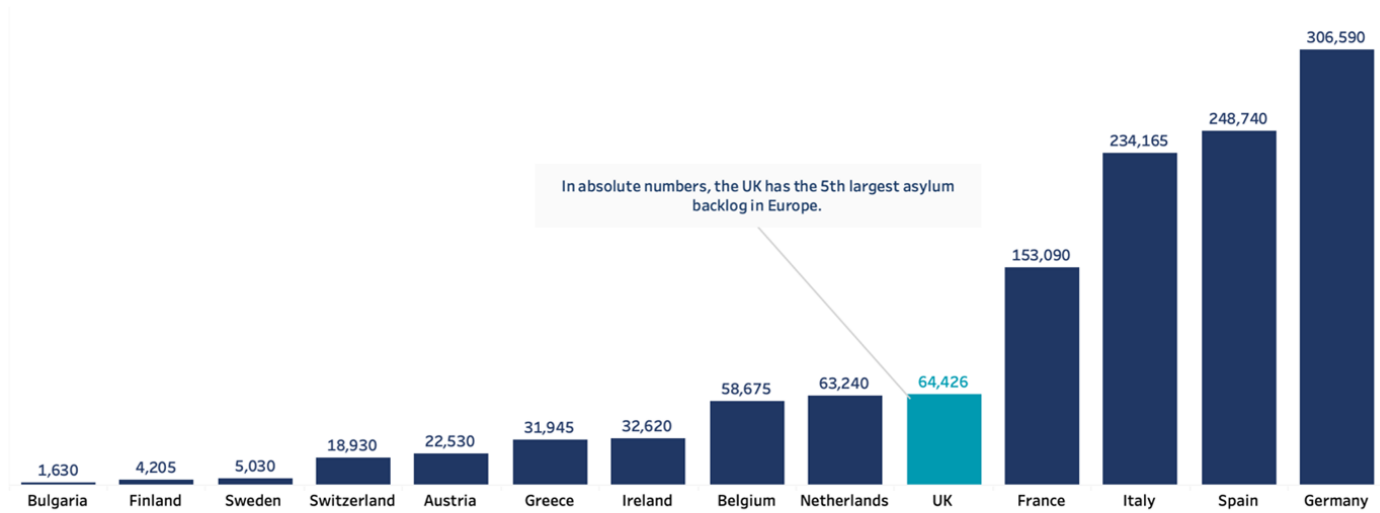
Other European countries also have large initial decision asylum backlogs. At the end of 2025, Germany had the largest backlog in Europe, with more than 300,000 people waiting for an initial decision. It was followed by Spain, Italy, and France. With 64,000 people awaiting an initial decision at the end of 2025, the UK had the fifth-largest backlog in Europe in absolute numbers.

The UK's initial decision asylum backlog is smaller than that of other European states if we consider its population. In large part, though, this is because the UK receives fewer applications relative to its population than some of its peers. Compared to the number of applications received in the previous three years, the UK's backlog was the tenth largest in Europe (Figure 10).

Figure 10

At the end of 2025, the UK had the fifth-largest initial decision asylum backlog in Europe
 Number of people awaiting an initial decision on their asylum claim, as of 31 December 2024, by country (main applicants and dependants)

- Number
- Per 100 asylum applications (2022-24)
- Per 100,000 inhabitants



Source: Eurostat Table migr_asypenczm (for EU countries), and Home Office Immigration Statistics, Table Asy_D03 (for the UK).
 Note: Data is individually collected by each national statistical agency, meaning the data may not be directly comparable.



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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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About the authors

Mihnea Cuibus

Researcher, The Migration Observatory

mihnea.cuibus@nuffield.ox.ac.uk

Peter William Walsh

Senior Researcher, The Migration Observatory

peter.walsh@compas.ox.ac.uk

Madeleine Sumption

Director, The Migration Observatory

madeleine.sumption@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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