



# REPORT

## Migrants' experiences of the UK immigration system

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## Executive Summary

Immigration policy relies on the idea that migrants understand the rules and can comply with them. Policy debates often focus on who is eligible for immigration status and who is not, but less attention is given to the impacts of different processes and criteria on people applying for status and how well they understand what is required of them.

The results of the online survey “Lived Experiences of the UK Immigration System” shed new light on non-UK citizens' interactions with the immigration system. The survey covered migrants' experiences of the immigration application process, their experiences proving their right to live and work and, more generally, their knowledge of the rights and conditions attached to their immigration status. These factors matter because people's understanding of the system and their ability to comply with the rules affects access to housing, employment and healthcare, as well as the risk of unnecessary loss of legal status.

The report compares the experiences and understanding of people who received their status under the EU Settlement Scheme (i.e., EU citizens and their family members who came to the UK under EU free movement rules) and those with 'non-EUSS' statuses (typically non-EU citizens arriving on family, work, or study visas).

Our survey results indicate that many migrants had a good experience of the UK immigration system. For example, over half of respondents did not find the immigration application process at all difficult, and 40% did not find the process at all stressful. In addition, 81% had not experienced problems proving their right to live and work in the UK, and the majority were aware of the rights attached to their immigration status. However, not all experiences were positive. Certain groups – particularly those facing more complex rules and processes – found navigating the immigration system more challenging:

- People applying for non-EUSS statuses were far more likely to seek help with their applications than those applying for EUSS status. This suggests that government efforts to make the EU Settlement Scheme process more user-friendly had some success, although a significant minority of EUSS applicants still required assistance.
- Pre-settled status holders (i.e., people who arrived in the UK under free movement but have lived in the UK for fewer than five years) had a lower awareness of their rights in the UK, particularly their entitlements to benefits and permitted absences from the UK. The rules attached to pre-settled status are complicated and have evolved since 2019 (when the EUSS was introduced).

Among respondents who had experienced issues proving their right to live and work in the UK, the most common problem was that the person checking the status did not accept the proof provided. People with eVisas – digital immigration documentation accessible via the UK government website – were more likely to have experienced this issue compared to those with physical immigration documentation. This creates the risk that some migrants may be denied access to employment, housing, or healthcare if the people who check their status – such as employers and landlords – are unfamiliar with the immigration rules and documentation. This finding has broader relevance beyond the EU Settlement Scheme because, in 2024, the Home Office started replacing physical immigration documents with eVisas, with the aim of making the border and immigration system 'digital by default' by 2025.

The survey results indicate that non-UK citizens who had previously had problems proving their rights to live and work were less certain about their ability to comply with immigration rules in the future. Compared to people who had not experienced an issue, they were less confident they could prove their rights. They also considered having physical documentation to be more important.

Migrants' understanding of their status – and the entitlements and responsibilities that come with it – is highly imperfect, so policymakers cannot assume that everyone understands the rules. While many do, there is evidence that some do not, particularly those with immigration statuses that have more rules attached and thus are harder to understand.

## Understanding the policy

Immigration status conditions people's lives in important ways. In the UK, most temporary statuses restrict access to welfare benefits, and migrants must show digital proof of their immigration status to work, rent a house or access certain types of healthcare without paying a charge. Both the specific rights and conditions attached to the status and the application process to obtain it vary depending on the immigration status.

### ***Settled status and pre-settled status***

The EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS) is a Home Office scheme created as part of the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement. It is designed to broadly maintain the rights that EU citizens and their non-EU family members who were living in the UK by 31 December 2020 had before Brexit by giving them a new immigration status.

The EUSS gives successful applicants one of two statuses: pre-settled status or settled status. Pre-settled status was designed for anyone who had been living in the UK for less than five years, while settled status was for those living here for five years or more, with some limited exceptions. Both statuses permit the holder to work, live, study and claim benefits in the UK, but the conditions and rights attached to pre-settled status are less secure than those of settled status. For example, whereas people with settled status can claim benefits regardless of their situation, pre-settled status holders must also meet certain eligibility criteria, such as being in work or being able to prove they are unable to meet their most basic needs. To upgrade to settled status, people with pre-settled status must prove they have lived in the UK for at least [six months](#) in any 12-month period over the course of five consecutive years, with some [limited exceptions](#). Previously, pre-settled status holders could not become UK citizens without first upgrading to settled status; as of July 2024 this is no longer the case.

For most people, applications to EUSS were relatively straightforward—at the end of June 2023, 79% of EUSS applications had been [concluded](#) within 90 days of date the application was made. However, the process was not straightforward for everyone. Those with low digital skills, low English proficiency, or precarious life situations (e.g. without secure accommodation or in low-paid, insecure jobs) often required assistance from charities to apply (see [Barnard, Costello and Butlin, 2024](#) and [ICIBI, 2022](#)). In addition, a 2020 Home Office [policy review](#) recognised that victims of domestic violence might not be able to access documentation, and disabled people could find it more difficult to provide the required evidence because they are less likely to be in work.

Applicants had to submit evidence of their identity and, in some cases, their residence, while non-EU family members were also required to prove their relationship with an EU citizen. With the exception of non-EU family members, applicants to the EUSS who were granted settled or pre-settled status did not receive a physical card showing their status; instead, they received [eVisas](#) (also known as 'digital status'), an online record of their immigration status which can be accessed via the UK government website. To prove their status, EUSS status holders can generate a unique 9-character alphanumeric code, known as a 'share code'. Each share code expires after 90 days, after which point the person would need to generate a new code to prove their rights.

### **Other immigration statuses**

Non-EU citizens and EU citizens arriving in the UK from 1 January 2021 (who are not family members of someone with an EUSS status) must hold a different form of leave to reside in the UK legally. For ease of understanding, this report refers to these immigration statuses collectively as 'non-EUSS statuses'.

Non-EUSS statuses that grant temporary leave are usually granted for a specific reason (e.g. a work, family or study visa) and are subject to more restrictive conditions than [Indefinite Leave to Remain](#) (also known as ILR, settlement or permanent residence). For example, most temporary non-EUSS statuses have No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), which restricts people from accessing most mainstream benefits and housing assistance, and people on work visas can only work in jobs which meet certain skill and salary thresholds. Visa holders can apply for ILR once they have lived in the UK on a qualifying temporary visa for a certain period of time, usually five years.

Applications for non-EUSS statuses are typically more complex than those for settled and pre-settled status, as people are required to provide more information to the Home Office. They usually require sponsorship from an employer (for work visas), educational institution (for study visas) or eligible family member, such as a spouse (for family visas). In addition, [visa fees](#) are among the highest in Western countries, whereas EUSS applications were free. In most cases, visa holders are issued a physical immigration document – a Biometric Residence Permit (BRP) – to prove their right to live and work in the UK, although they may also be asked to present a digital share code. In 2024, however, the Home Office is [rolling out eVisas for non-EUSS status holders](#), meaning most non-UK citizens will have a digital-only immigration status from 1 January 2025. After this date, BRPs will no longer be valid.

### **Understanding the Evidence**

This report draws on data from the online survey "[Lived Experiences of the UK Immigration System](#)", based on a non-probability sample of adult migrants living in the UK. In this report, we use the term 'migrant' to refer to the non-naturalised population. In other words, people living in the UK who were born outside of the UK or Ireland and do not have UK or Irish citizenship.

#### **Data collection**

Survey respondents were recruited through advertisements on Facebook and Instagram and targeted based on nationality, gender and language. There were three waves of data collection, which took place between June and December 2023. Respondents from certain countries (Brazil, Bulgaria, Italy, Lithuania, Latin American countries, Poland, Portugal, Spain, and Romania) could complete the survey in English or their native language. The languages were chosen based on the largest communities from EU countries living in the UK.

Respondents were asked about their demographic characteristics, economic activity, and migration decisions, as well as the conditions attached to their legal immigration status and their experiences applying for and managing this status. After removing UK citizens and duplicates, a total of 5,482 responses were collected. However, people who completed the survey in under 8 minutes (the median time for completing the survey was 13 minutes) or failed an attention check were excluded from the final sample (462 responses). A small minority of respondents answered the survey twice; in such cases, we retained only their first survey completion.

The final sample used for the analysis presented in this report consists of 5,020 individuals. See the Appendix for more details about the composition of the sample.

Additional questions were asked to double-check people's responses to the question on immigration status. There are 65 respondents who could not be identified by their specific immigration status because they either did not know it or did not want to provide the information. These respondents have been excluded from the analysis. The 21 respondents who applied for the EUSS but did not have a status are included in the analysis.

### ***Weighting***

Some target groups were overrepresented by design or more likely to respond to the survey than others, meaning the overall profile of respondents did not match the target population. For example, 71% of survey respondents were women, compared to 53% of the adult non-citizen population living in England and Wales in 2021. If the opinions and experiences of overrepresented groups differ from those of underrepresented groups, this could lead to biased results. In light of this, survey responses were weighted to more closely match the share of non-naturalised adult migrants living in the UK. Responses were weighted based on four characteristics of non-citizens – country of birth, gender, age, and education levels – using bespoke data from the 2021 Census from England and Wales.

As a result, the survey responses of migrant groups who are underrepresented count for more in the analysis presented in this report. For example, 7% of survey respondents were Polish-born women aged between 25 and 34 with lower levels of education (343 respondents), whereas Polish-born women of that age group only represent 1.11% of the non-UK-born non-UK citizen population. After applying weighting, the adjusted number falls to 85 respondents (1.69%), largely correcting the overrepresentation. A small mismatch remains because some subgroups – Chinese men, for example – are not represented in our sample; thus, their responses cannot be weighted to reflect the wider population. See the appendix for more information about the characteristics of the weighted and unweighted samples.

### ***Data analysis***

Various breakdowns of the results are presented in each section of the report. However, some of these differences may not reflect actual differences in the population – in many cases, they are driven by other characteristics held by the groups being compared. For example, a difference between younger and older respondents may not be a result of age, but the fact younger and older respondents hold different types of immigration status, which can lead to different experiences. All the findings and differences between groups described in the report text are statistically significant, which means that they are unlikely to be the result of chance.

In addition, because almost all survey respondents applied for their status successfully, the survey responses may not fully reflect the experiences of those who had their applications refused.

## What was migrants' experience of applying for their immigration status?

For most migrants, the first interaction they have with the Home Office occurs when they apply for their immigration status. The process and eligibility criteria differ for each application, and some are more complex than others. Yet regardless of the specific immigration status, a smooth process – without delays or other complications – can be beneficial for both migrants and the Home Office. For migrants, a manageable process increases certainty and reduces the risks that people will make mistakes or let their status lapse accidentally. For the government, the complexity of the process affects processing costs and the costs spent reviewing challenges.

When the Home Office sets application requirements, it therefore involves a balancing act. If immigration applications are [too complex](#) or request too much information, then applicants are more likely to make mistakes and/or require help to apply. On the other hand, if they are [too simple](#), they risk not collecting the necessary information needed to make an accurate decision.

### ***How difficult is it to complete immigration applications?***

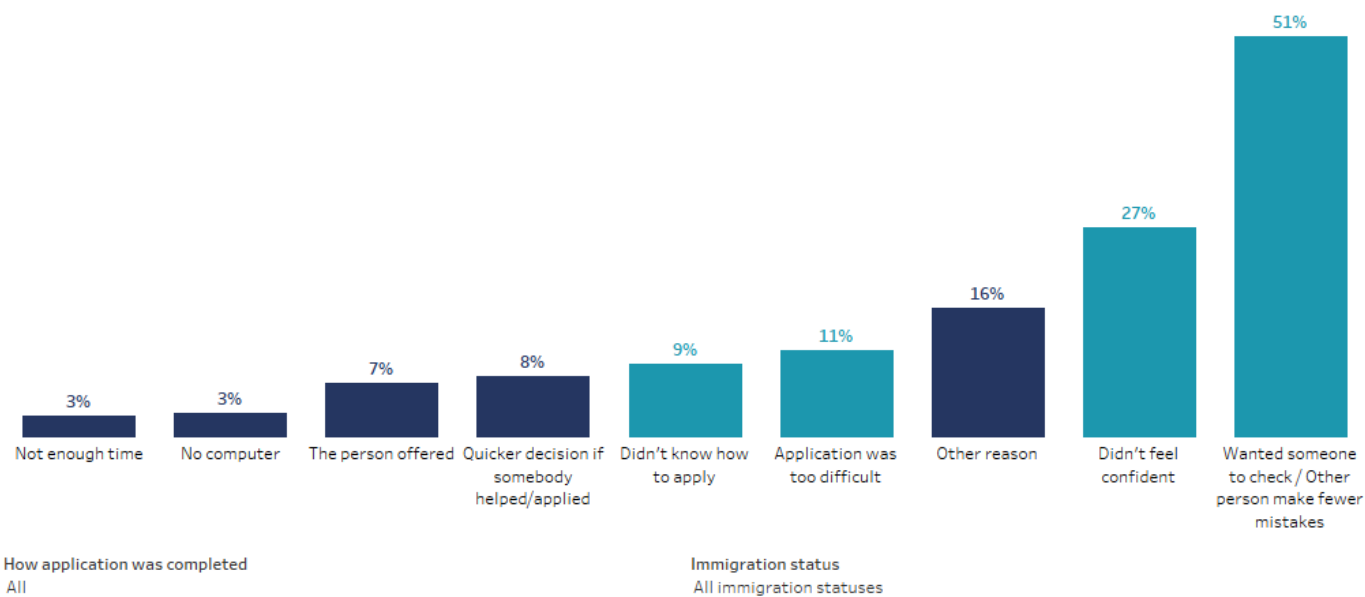
Measuring the complexity of immigration applications is not easy. However, one metric that enables us to compare experiences across different groups of migrants and different application types is whether people are able to complete the application without assistance. Our survey asked respondents whether they had received help with their most recent immigration application and, if so, why.

The two most common reasons applicants had help related to confidence: 51% said they wanted someone to check their application to avoid mistakes, and 27% didn't feel confident applying on their own (Figure 1). Relatively few people cited a person offering to help, which may include corporate HR departments, in the case of work visa applications. This suggests that receiving help is related to the perceived [administrative burden](#) or complexity of the application process.

Figure 1

**Why respondents did not complete their immigration application on their own**

Reasons cited by respondents who received help or had someone apply on their behalf



Source: Migration Observatory Lived Experiences of the UK Immigration System survey, 2023.

Notes: Light blue bars are reasons relating to the complexity of the application. Figures are weighted by country of birth, gender, age and education, according to the 2021 Census of England and Wales.



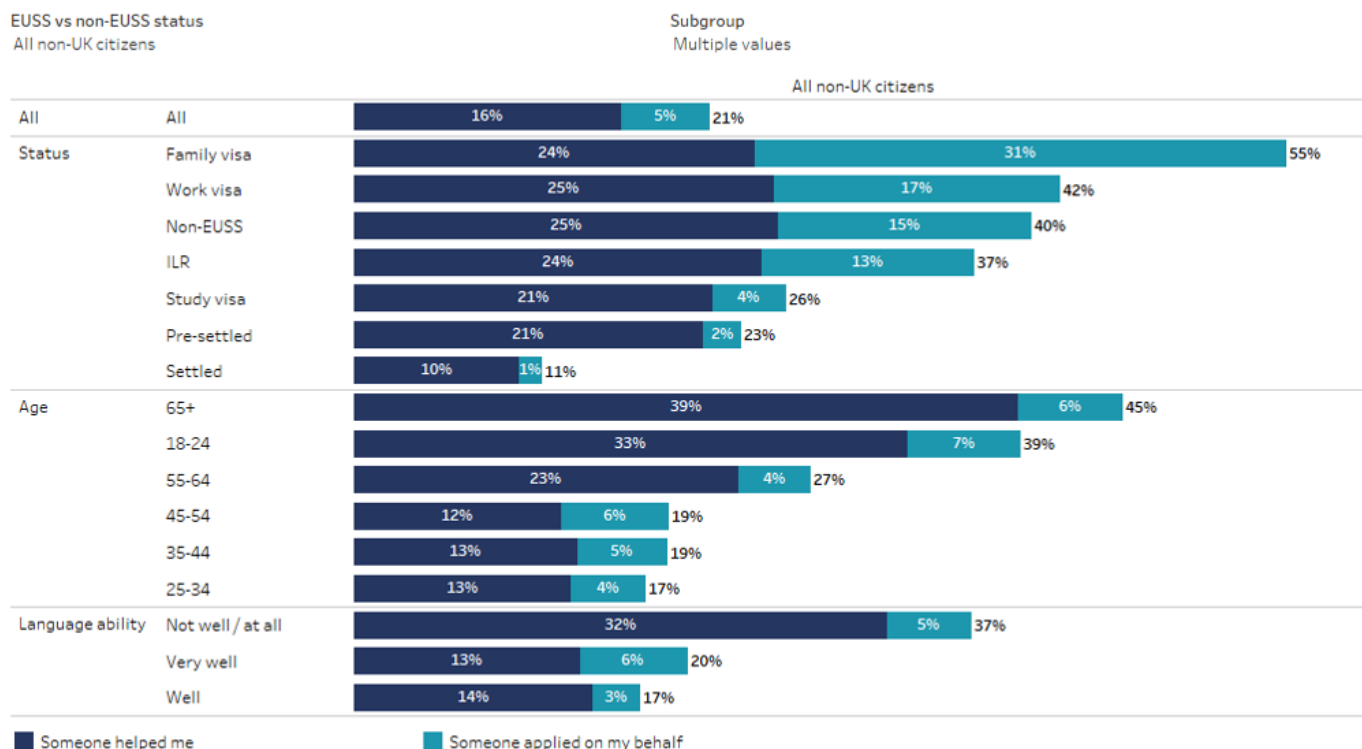
Figure 2 shows the proportion of people who received help with their application. Around a fifth of respondents received help: 16% said someone helped them, and 5% said someone completed the application on their behalf. However, these shares vary widely depending on both the type of application and the applicant's characteristics. Respondents applying for family visas and work visas were considerably more likely to have received help than those applying for settled or pre-settled status. This likely reflects the fact the government [designed](#) the EU Settlement Scheme applications to be straightforward—relatively little information is requested, and many applicants can rely on automated checks of government records, which makes the process easier and faster. By contrast, non-EUSS applications are more complex. Applicants must provide more information to the Home Office and may require sponsorship (see 'Understanding the Policy'). For example, people applying for family visas must provide detailed information on their earnings and address history.

Demographic groups that are [considered](#) more vulnerable were also more likely to have had help with their applications. For example, people with lower educational qualifications and lower English language ability, as well as the youngest and oldest adult cohorts, more often received assistance (note that the survey did not cover children).

Figure 2

### How respondents completed their immigration status application

Share who applied with the help of others, or had another person apply on their behalf



Source: Migration Observatory Lived Experiences of the UK Immigration System survey, 2023.

Notes: A small number of respondents who said they had never applied for an immigration status are excluded. Respondents from USA, Canada, South Africa and Oceania are excluded from the language ability breakdown. Figures are weighted by country of birth, gender, age and education to match the characteristics of the non-naturalised migrant population according to the 2021 Census of England and Wales.



Different groups of applicants had different motivations for seeking help, and the amount of help they received varied. Work visa holders were most likely to receive help from their employers and to say they had help because it had been offered to them. Migrants on family visas, however, cited reasons related to personal ability and time more often and were more likely to turn to immigration lawyers. By contrast, over three-quarters of EUSS status holders said they received help from family or friends, indicating that the assistance they received was more informal. See Appendix C for more information.

### Migrants' experience applying for their immigration status

To gauge survey respondents' experiences of the application process, we asked them to what extent they found the process **difficult**, **stressful**, and **time-consuming** (see Appendix B for details of the question design). Note that because almost all survey respondents applied for their status successfully, the survey responses may not fully reflect the experiences of those who had their applications refused.

On the whole, respondents' experiences of the application process were broadly positive: for example, over half of respondents did not find the process at all difficult, and 40% did not find it at all stressful. However, as shown in Figure 3, others had a more negative experience. An estimated 14% of respondents across all application types found the experience 'very' or 'extremely' stressful, and 11% found it 'very' or 'extremely' time-consuming.

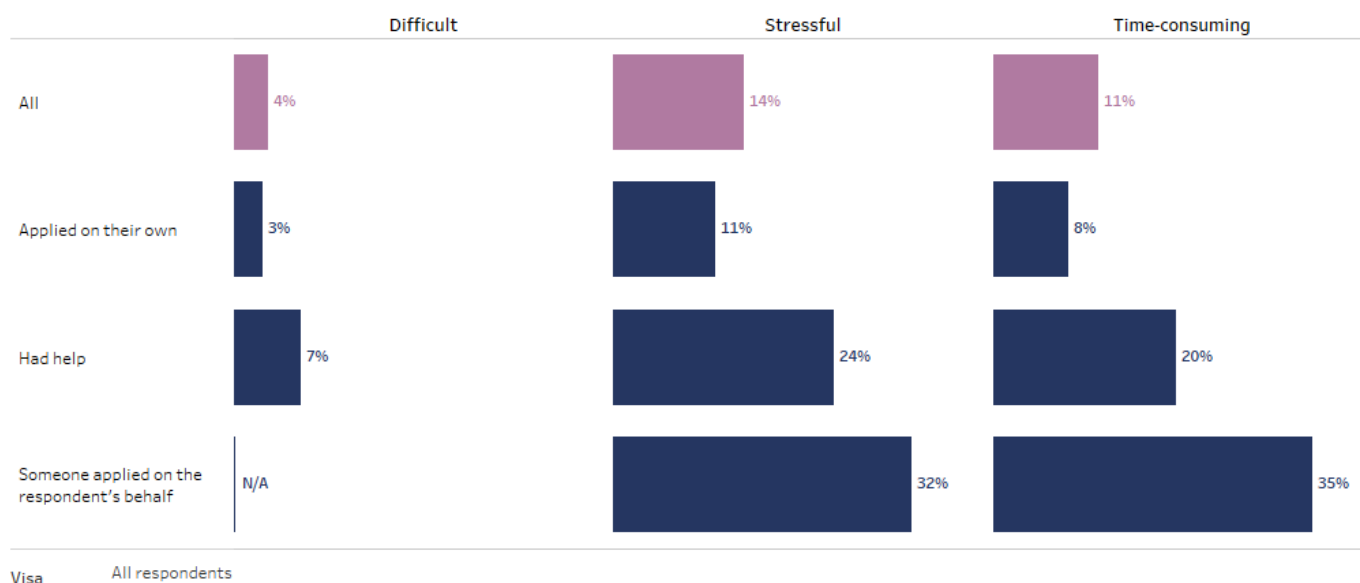


Respondents who found the application more difficult, stressful or time-consuming were more likely to have received assistance. For example, 32% of people who had someone apply on their behalf found the application 'very' or 'extremely' stressful, compared to 11% of people who applied on their own (Figure 3). An exception is respondents on work visas who had someone else apply on their behalf—they had a more positive experience, which may reflect the role of corporate HR services in taking care of applications for sponsored workers.

Figure 3

**Respondents' experience of applying for their immigration status, by amount of help with application**

Proportion of respondents who said the immigration application process was very or extremely:



Visa All respondents

Source: Migration Observatory Lived Experiences of the UK Immigration System survey, 2023.

Notes: Figures refer to the share of respondents who said their last immigration application was 'very' or 'extremely' difficult, stressful or time consuming. Figures are weighted by country of birth, gender, age and education to match the characteristics of the non-naturalised migrant population according to the 2021 Census of England and Wales.

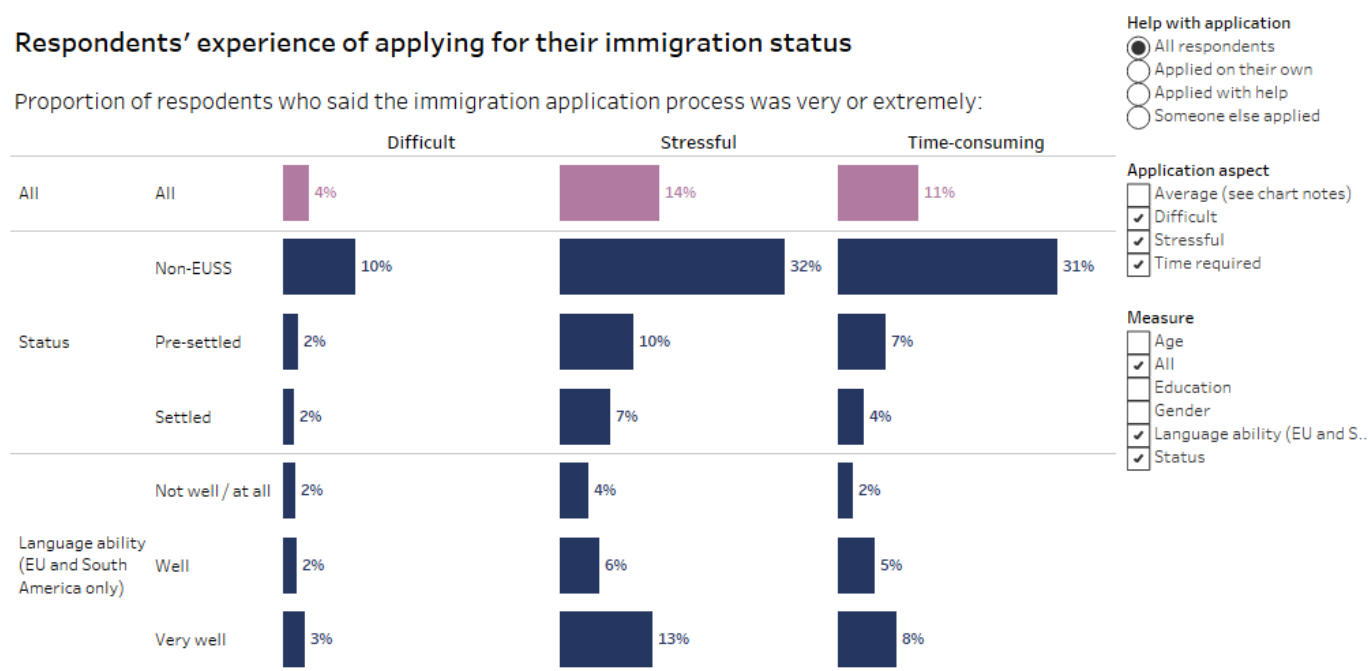


The most common reasons applicants sought help related to a lack of confidence in their ability to complete the application correctly (see Figure 1 above). As such, this suggests that help was sought when the application process was more complex. In support of this, a higher proportion of respondents with non-EUSS statuses said they found the process 'very' or 'extremely' difficult, stressful, or time-consuming compared to those who applied for settled or pre-settled status (Figure 4). As noted above, applications for non-EUSS statuses are typically more complex than those for EUSS statuses.

Figure 4

### Respondents' experience of applying for their immigration status

Proportion of respondents who said the immigration application process was very or extremely:



Source: Migration Observatory Lived Experiences of the UK Immigration System survey, 2023.

Notes: Figures refer to the share of respondents who said their last immigration application was 'very' or 'extremely' difficult, stressful or time consuming. 'Average' is the average share across the three individual aspects. Some breakdowns are not displayed due to low sample sizes. Figures are weighted by country of birth, gender, age and education to match the characteristics of the non-naturalised migrant population according to the 2021 Census of England and Wales.



Statistically, respondents aged over 65 found the application process more difficult than younger age groups. The UK immigration system is largely digitised, and [immigration lawyers](#) have suggested that older migrants are less likely to have the technological abilities or hardware to complete applications online.

Counterintuitively, among respondents born in Continental Europe and South America (i.e. countries where English is not an official language), those who speak English 'very well' found the application process more stressful and time-consuming than those with limited proficiency. It is unclear what is driving this pattern. It is primarily concentrated among respondents born in South America, Portugal and Bulgaria, and is not related to people's immigration status.

### How much do migrants know about the rights and conditions associated with their immigration status?

People's immigration status determines whether they can stay in the UK permanently, access public services and financial support, and work in jobs without meeting skill or salary requirements (see 'Understanding the Policy'). Those with greater awareness of the conditions tied to their immigration status are more likely to comply with these rules and maintain their legal status. They will also be better able to access the support they are entitled to if needed—such as healthcare or benefits.

To gauge survey respondents' understanding of their rights, we asked whether their status:

- has an expiry date (and thus allows them to remain in the UK permanently without submitting another application);
- allows them to remain outside of the UK for either 6 months or 2 years;
- enables them to apply for most state benefits, such as universal credit, housing benefits, and child benefits;
- allows them to receive hospital treatment, such as surgery, without being charged afterwards or
- permits them to work for any employer in the UK.

### Do migrants know whether they have a temporary or permanent status?

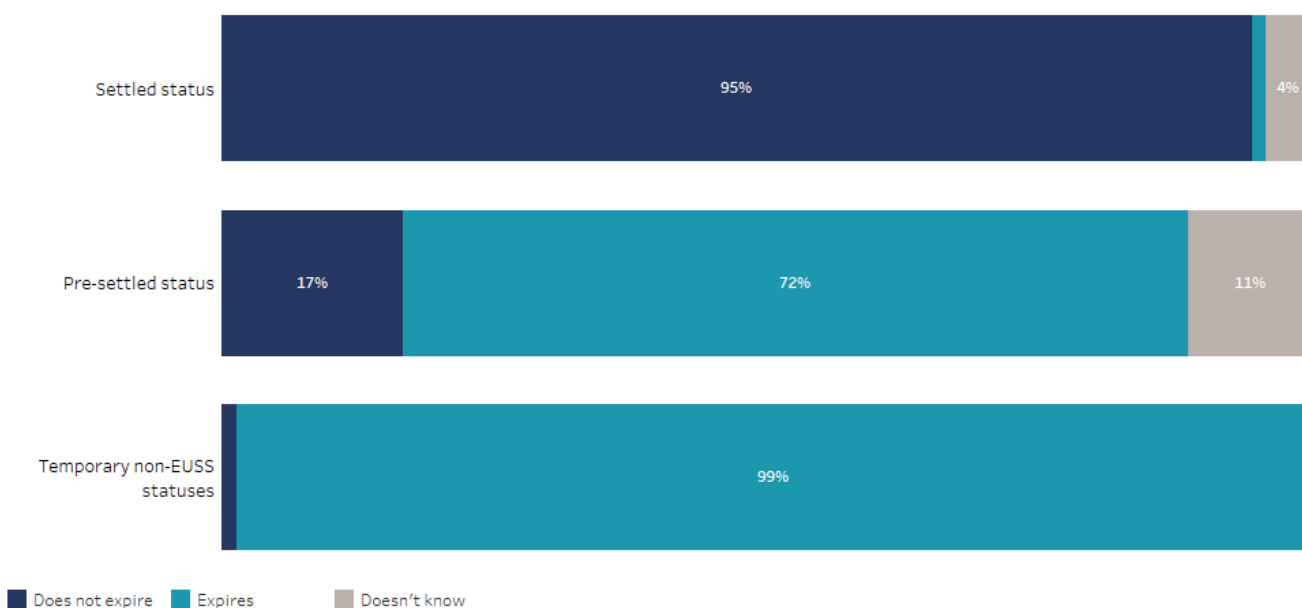
Perhaps the most important condition tied to each immigration status is whether it permits the holder to remain in the UK permanently (i.e., without submitting a new application) or for only a limited period of time.

Permanent status (ILR and settled status) gives migrants more certainty, which enables long-term decision-making, such as buying a property. People holding temporary non-EUSS immigration statuses (e.g. work, family, and study visas), by contrast, will typically need to reapply to the Home Office to receive permanent status and the security that comes with it. If they are not aware of this, they risk losing their status if they do not apply in time or forgo some of the advantages of a move to permanent status. For pre-settled status holders, the rules are more complicated, as discussed below.

Almost all respondents with settled status or temporary non-EUSS statuses (i.e., excluding ILR) correctly identified whether their immigration status would expire or not (Figure 5). Respondents with pre-settled status, by contrast, were less sure: 17% said their immigration status would not expire, and a further 11% did not know whether they needed to make a further application.

Figure 5

Share of respondents who believe their immigration status has an expiry date  
By respondents' immigration status



Source: Migration Observatory Lived Experiences of the UK Immigration System survey, 2023.

Note: Respondents with ILR are excluded from the non-EUSS column. Figures are weighted by country of birth, gender, age and education to match the characteristics of the non-naturalised migrant population according to the 2021 Census of England and Wales.



The lower awareness among pre-settled status holders likely reflects the complex and evolving residence rules attached to pre-settled status. When the EUSS was first introduced, pre-settled status lasted for only five years, meaning people who did not upgrade to settled status would see their status expire. However, following a [high court judgement](#) in December 2022, pre-settled status holders can stay in the UK indefinitely, without reapplying, if they still meet the original eligibility criteria. In addition, in 2024, the Home Office said it would begin automatically [upgrading](#) people to settled status once they become eligible. Together, these changes reduce the risk that pre-settled status holders will drop out of legal status. However, knowledge about permitted absences could remain a challenge, as the next section discusses.

### Do EUSS status holders know if they can be absent from the UK?

Rules around absences from the UK are closely linked to eligibility for permanent status. Most pre-settled status holders, for example, can only upgrade to settled status once they have five years of continuous residence in the UK. Except in some limited circumstances, if they are absent from the UK for more than six months in any 12-month period, their continuous residence will be broken. As such, pre-settled status holders who do not understand the rules surrounding absences may jeopardise their ability to remain permanently by staying outside the UK for too long.

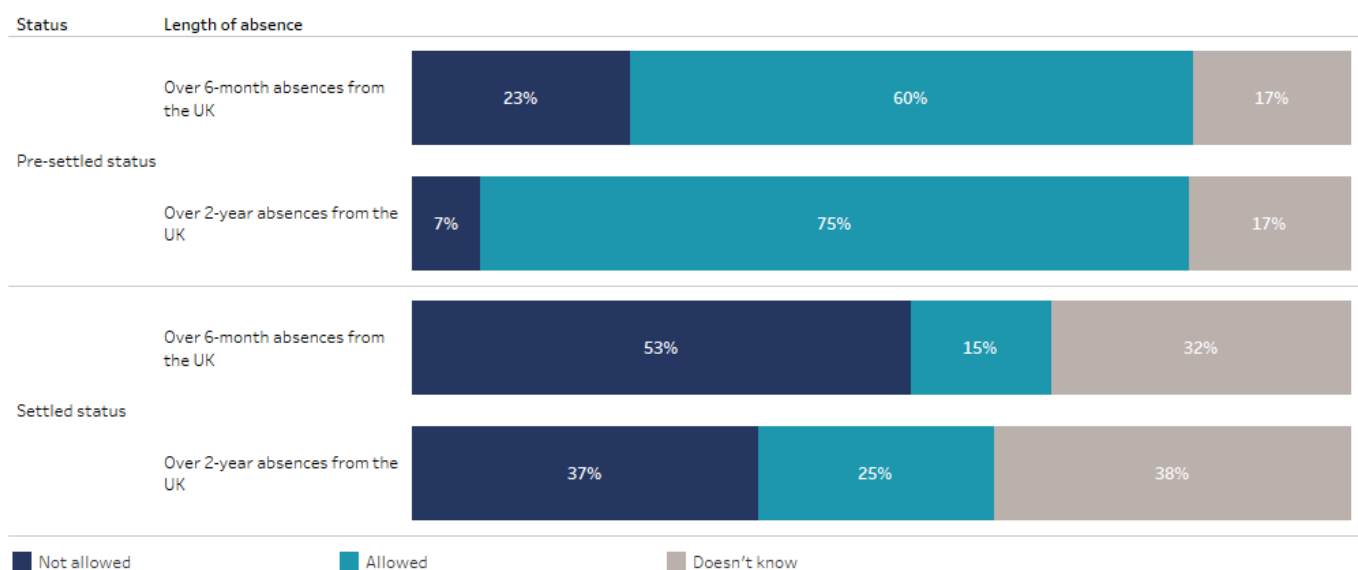
Almost a quarter of respondents with pre-settled status believed they could be outside the UK for over six months (Figure 6). It is not clear whether these people are aware of how such an absence would affect their continuous residence because our survey question did not reference upgrading to settled status. However, the data suggest there may be a lack of understanding of absence rules that could cause problems for EU citizens with pre-settled status in future years.

At the time of the survey, a person would lose pre-settled status if they had been outside of the UK for more than two years. Three-quarters of respondents with pre-settled status were aware of this, while 17% did not know, and 7% believed they could be absent for this length of time. The risk of pre-settled status lapsing is now lower, as in May 2024, the Home Office [increased](#) the period a person could be outside of the UK without losing their status to five years. However, as noted above, longer absences prevent pre-settled status holders from upgrading to the more secure settled status.

Figure 6

#### Share of respondents who believe they can be absent from the UK

By respondents' immigration status and length of absence



Display All

Source: Migration Observatory Lived Experiences of the UK Immigration System survey, 2023.

Note: Figures are weighted by country of birth, gender, age and education to match the characteristics of the non-naturalised migrant population according to the 2021 Census of England and Wales.



Most settled status holders have been able to remain outside of the UK for 5 years since the creation of the EUSS—however, only 37% of respondents with settled status were aware of this (Figure 6). As a result, it could be the case that these respondents would not leave the UK for longer periods of time if required.

### ***Do migrants know about their benefits eligibility and access to secondary health care?***

A person's immigration status affects the public services and benefits they can receive. Most temporary migrants (i.e., those with statuses that expire) [cannot access](#) benefits in the UK, although there are exceptions for people with refugee status and pre-settled status holders who meet certain conditions, such as being in work. By contrast, migrants on non-visitor visas lasting for over 6 months have full access to the NHS given that they paid the [Immigration Health Surcharge](#) as part of their visa application.

Poor awareness of entitlements is a problem if, for example, it means migrants refrain from seeking support that they require or incur avoidable costs.

A little over 20% of respondents whose immigration status allows them to apply for benefits either did not think they were eligible for benefits or did not know (Figure 7). This figure masks differences in levels of awareness by immigration status, however. Whereas 19% of people with settled status did not know they were eligible, this was the case for 27% with indefinite leave to remain and 32% of eligible pre-settled status holders (i.e., people with pre-settled status who were also in work).

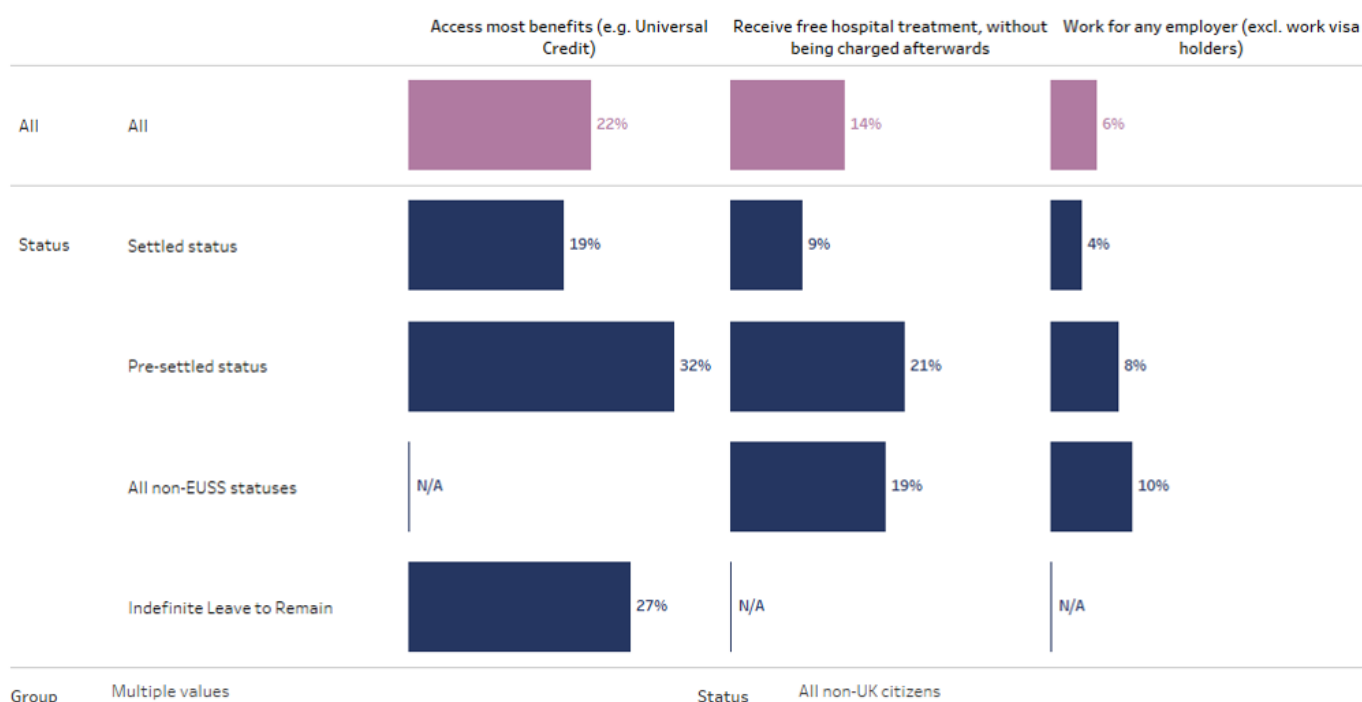
Similar to the temporary or permanent nature of pre-settled status, the rules regarding pre-settled status holders' eligibility for benefits are complex. Previously, they could only claim benefits if they were in employment or had a family member with an EUSS status who was eligible. These rules were upheld in two high-profile [court cases](#) before being partially lifted in December 2022, when it was ruled that people with pre-settled status who were out of work could claim benefits if they were unable to meet their most basic needs. It is possible that pre-settled status holders' low awareness owes to this complexity.

Compared to benefits eligibility, respondents were more likely to know whether they were eligible to receive NHS hospital treatment for free without facing a charge at a later point (Figure 7). Almost a third of study visa holders did not know they could receive hospital treatment for free, however. Students may have less awareness of their right to access secondary healthcare because they are generally younger than holders of other status and may use the NHS less frequently. In our sample, 73% of students were aged under 35, compared to 42% of non-students.

Figure 7

### Respondents' awareness of their rights in the UK

Share of eligible respondents who did NOT know their immigration status allows them to:



Source: Migration Observatory Lived Experiences of the UK Immigration System survey, 2023.

Note: Non-working pre-settled status holders are excluded from the benefits eligibility results and respondents from USA, Canada, South Africa and Oceania are excluded from the language ability breakdowns. Results for some subgroups are not displayed due to small sample sizes. Figures are weighted by country of birth, gender, age and education to match the characteristics of the non-naturalised migrant population according to the 2021 Census of England and Wales.



### Do migrants know whether they can work for any employer in the UK?

Migrants' conditions of access to the labour market depend on their immigration status. Most visa holders can work for any employer, including EUSS status holders and people with family visas, refugee status or ILR. However, people who do not realise they can work in any job or for any employer may not take on extra work when they face financial hardship and may be more vulnerable to exploitation.

The survey results presented in Figure 7 suggest that EUSS status holders generally had good knowledge of their right to work for any employer, although 8% of pre-settled status holders and 10% of people reporting low English language proficiency did not know they were entitled to do so. Note that work visa holders are excluded from this breakdown—some work visas [allow](#) the holder to take on second jobs, whereas others do not, but we do not ask respondents which specific work visa they have.

### People's experiences managing and accessing their immigration status

Migrants' interaction with the immigration system does not end once they receive a visa or EUSS status. To access the labour and housing markets, receive secondary healthcare, or get married, non-citizens must prove they hold a valid immigration status. Under the so-called '[compliant environment](#)' (previously 'hostile environment'), penalties are in place for employers and landlords who employ or let a property to a non-UK citizen without a right to work or rent, including fines and potential prison sentences.

Most EUSS status holders have an 'eVisa', an online record of their immigration status, which can be accessed via the UK government website. To prove their immigration status, they must obtain a temporary digital share code on gov.uk. By contrast, most non-EUSS status holders can show a physical document, such as a biometric residence card (BRC) or biometric residence permit (BRP) (see 'Understanding the Policy'). In 2024, however, the Home Office began rolling out eVisas for non-EUSS status holders, meaning most non-citizens will have a digital-only immigration status from 1 January 2025. This raises the question of how many respondents have experienced problems proving their right to live and work—particularly those with digital documentation.

**Have respondents experienced problems proving their right to live and work?**

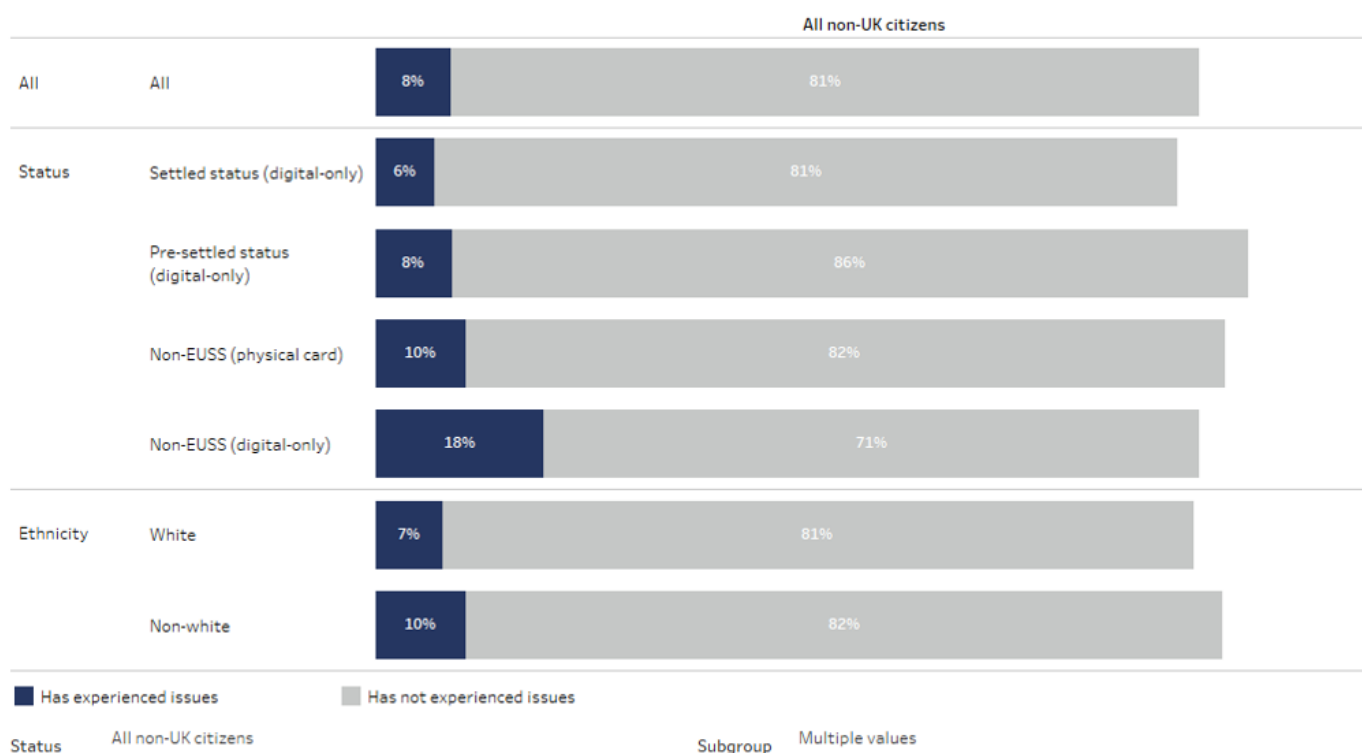
Most survey respondents (81%) had not experienced problems proving their right to live and work in the UK. A small share reported issues (8%), while 11% had never been asked to prove their immigration status (Figure 8).

Looking in more detail, Figure 8 suggests that non-EUSS status holders with digital-only documentation (i.e., an eVisa) were more likely to have experienced issues than non-EUSS holders with physical documentation (e.g., a BRC or BRP) despite having fewer years of residence. On average, non-EUSS status holders who had digital-only documentation at the time of the survey had lived in the UK for six years, compared to nine years for those with physical documentation.

**Figure 8**

**Problems managing immigration status in the UK**

Share of respondents who have previously proved their right to live and work, by whether experienced issues



Source: Migration Observatory Lived Experiences of the UK Immigration System survey, 2023.

Notes: The remaining respondents have never been asked to prove their immigration status. Figures are weighted by country of birth, gender, age and education to match the characteristics of the non-naturalised migrant population according to the 2021 Census of England and Wales.



Overall, non-white respondents experienced more problems than white respondents, but this masks a difference in immigration status. While non-white respondents with an EUSS status were more likely to say they had experienced issues, non-white respondents with a non-EUSS status were less likely. It is unclear whether these results reflect real differences between the two groups, as the sample sizes are small—further research is therefore required on non-white migrants' experience with the EUSS.

After accounting for other characteristics, respondents with graduate qualifications and those aged under 35 or over 65 were marginally more likely to have experienced issues proving their immigration status.

**Most common problems encountered by respondents while proving their right to live and work**

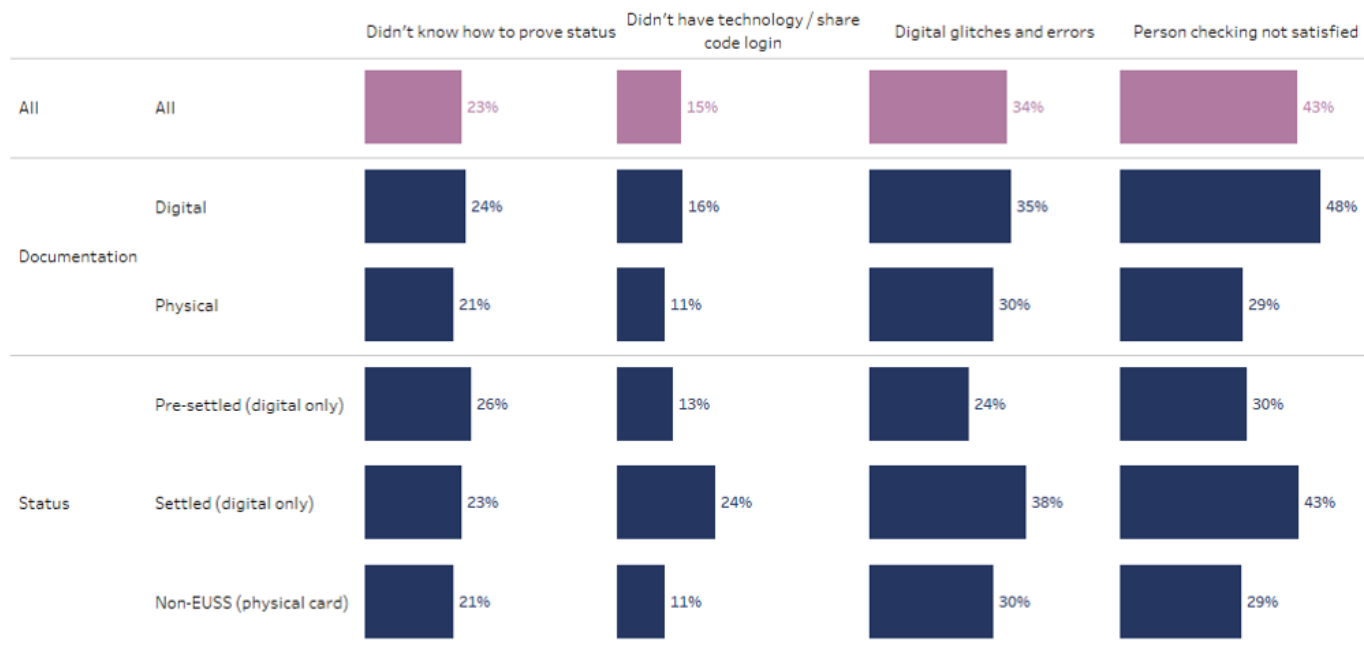
Respondents who reported issues in the past were asked what issue they encountered specifically. The most common problem was not having the proof of status accepted by the person checking (43%), while access issues (i.e., not having a phone, laptop or share code login details) were the least common (15%) (Figure 9).

Among respondents who had experienced problems proving their status, almost half (48%) of those with digital-only immigration statuses (with EUSS statuses or BRC/BRP) cited the person checking their application, compared to 29% of physical status holders. Research from the [University of York](#), conducted in 2023, indicates that landlords are less likely to accept digital-only statuses. By contrast, physical status holders were more likely to say they had experienced 'another problem' (31%, not shown in Figure 9).

Figure 9

**Respondent difficulties proving immigration status, by issue encountered**

Share Of respondents who have encountered an issue proving their status



Share  
 ○ Of all respondents who have had to prove their status  
 ● Of respondents who have encountered an issue proving their status

Source: Migration Observatory Lived Experiences of the UK Immigration System survey, 2023.

Notes: Respondents from USA, Canada, South Africa and Oceania are excluded from the language ability breakdown. Figures are weighted by country of birth, gender, age and education to match the characteristics of the non-naturalised migrant population according to the 2021 Census of England and Wales.





A different split emerges when comparing issues encountered by immigration status. Respondents with settled status were more likely to have experienced a [digital glitch or error](#), such as having a different immigration status listed on the gov.uk website. Around half (55%) of settled status holders who experienced this problem did so during international travel, compared to 40% of respondents with other immigration statuses (Appendix C). Settled status holders will likely travel more often than those with non-EUSS statuses because their home countries tend to be closer.

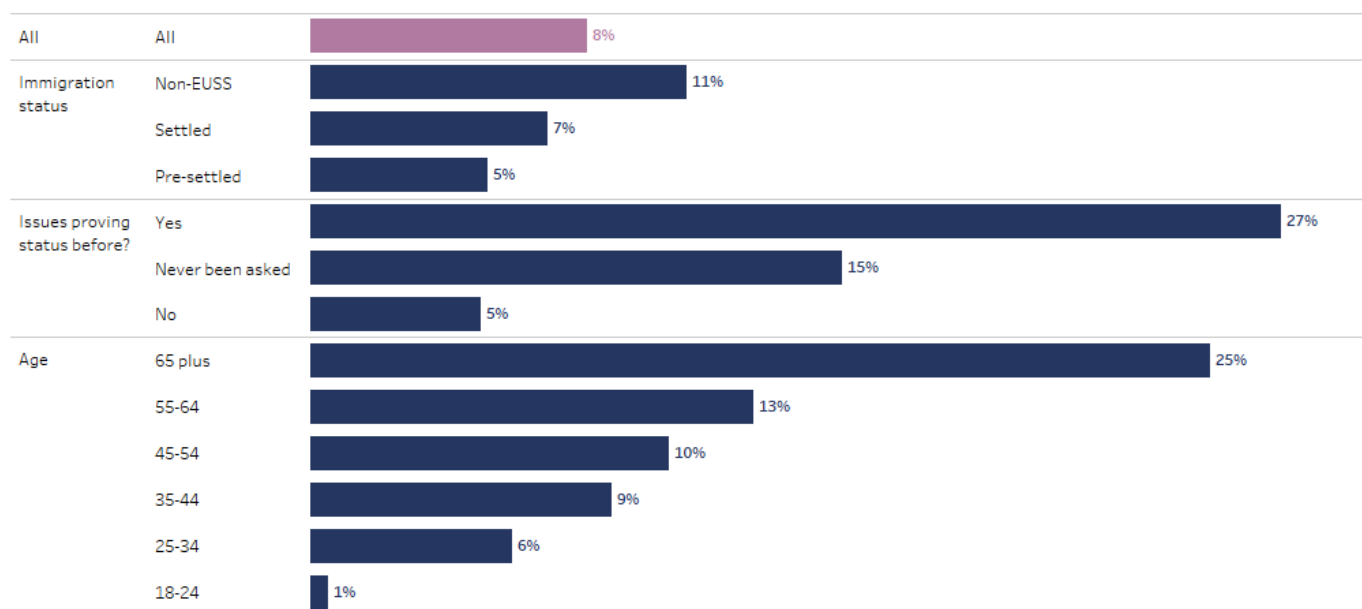
### Confidence generating digital share codes

EUSS was designed as a digital-only immigration system, which means that most settled and pre-settled status holders never had physical proof of their status – they always had to go through digital immigration checks (see the 'Understanding the Policy'). Migrants with non-EUSS statuses, by contrast, tend to have physical documentation. In 2024, however, the Home Office started [replacing](#) these physical immigration documents with digital records (eVisas), with the aim of making the border and immigration system 'digital by default' by 2025. It is important to gauge, therefore, how confident migrants are they can generate a digital share code to prove their status in the future.

Figure 10 shows the proportion of respondents who said they were 'slightly' or 'not at all' confident (see Appendix B for more information about the question design). Overall, only 8% said they were 'slightly' or 'not at all' confident. However, those who had previously experienced an issue proving their right to live and work were significantly less confident. This suggests that migrants' trust in the immigration system is related to their personal experiences with that system. Indeed, 40% of respondents who had previously experienced issues proving their status also said they had 'little trust' in the Home Office, compared to 17% of respondents who had not experienced problems or not had to prove their status.

Figure 10

#### Share of respondents who were **NOT** confident they could generate a digital share code in the future



Status All non-UK citizens

Source: Migration Observatory Lived Experiences of the UK Immigration System survey, 2023.

Notes: Figures refer to the share of respondents who said they were 'not at all' or 'slightly' they could generate a digital share code to prove their status. Respondents from USA, Canada, South Africa and Oceania are excluded from the language ability breakdown. Figures are weighted by country of birth, gender, age and education to match the characteristics of the non-naturalised migrant population according to the 2021 Census of England and Wales.



Older respondents were less confident they could generate a digital share code, which likely owes to lower levels of computer literacy among these people. According to ONS, 79% of people – both UK and non-UK-born – living in the UK who [didn't use the internet](#) in 2018 were aged 65 or over.

Settled and pre-settled status holders were also more confident, a result which may be explained by familiarity with generating digital share codes. It also suggests that confidence among EUSS status holders has not been affected by reports of several [high-profile glitches](#) with digital immigration statuses, including [cases](#) where people who applied for an upgrade to settled status lost access to their existing pre-settled status. Note that there was also no difference in average levels of confidence depending on whether respondents had physical or digital documentation.

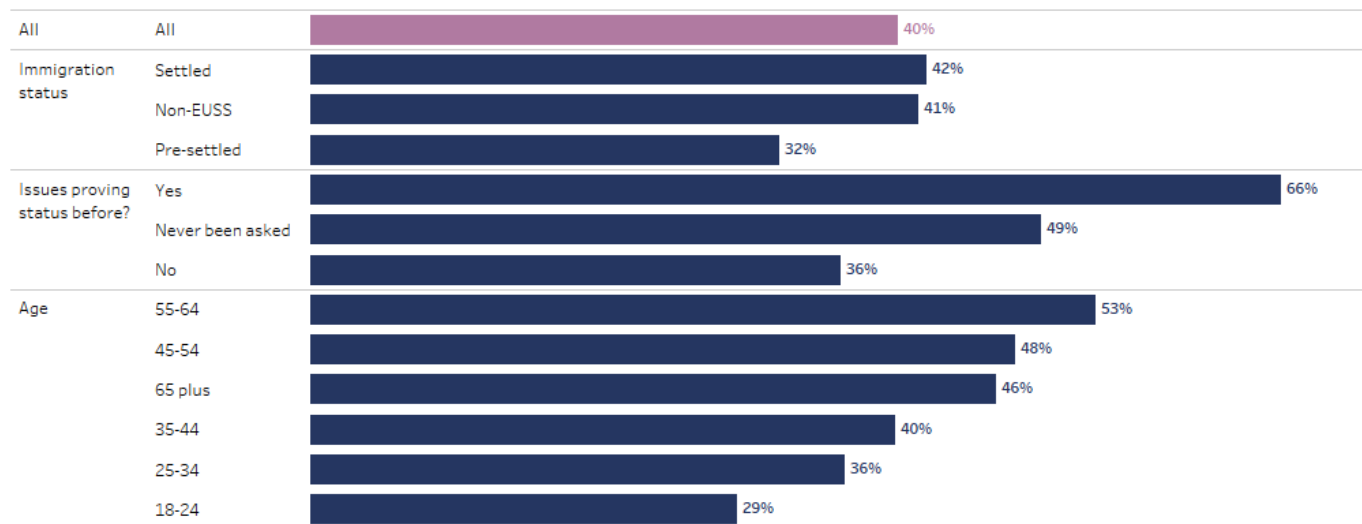
### Importance of physical documentation

Survey respondents who had digital-only immigration documentation were asked how important they viewed having a physical card, such as a BRP, to prove their status. Figure 11 shows the share of people who said a physical card was 'very' or 'extremely' important to them (see Appendix B for more information).

Broadly speaking, groups of respondents who considered having a physical card to be more important also had less confidence they could generate a digital share code. For example, people who had previously experienced a problem proving their status were more likely to consider physical documentation to be important, as did older respondents. Similarly, respondents with settled status or non-EUSS status considered having a physical card to be more important than people with pre-settled status.

Figure 11

Share of respondents who were said having a physical card to prove their status was important to them  
Respondents with digital immigration documentation only



Immigratio.. All non-UK citizens

Source: Migration Observatory Lived Experiences of the UK Immigration System survey, 2023.

Notes: Figures refer to the share of respondents who said they said having physical documentation (e.g. a card) to prove their immigration status was 'very' or 'extremely' important to them. Respondents from USA, Canada, South Africa and Oceania are excluded from the language ability breakdown. Figures are weighted by country of birth, gender, age and education to match the characteristics of the non-naturalised migrant population according to the 2021 Census of England and Wales.



## Evidence gaps and limitations

Although survey responses are weighted to reflect the characteristics of the adult migrant population living in the UK, the experiences of respondents may not be representative of the wider population. This will be the case if people who chose to answer the survey are different to those who did not. For example, respondents from certain countries could only complete the survey in English (see the Understanding the Evidence section), which, in turn, may have led to lower response rates among migrants with limited English language skills from these countries. If the knowledge and experience of these migrants differ from those with higher levels of English, their experiences would be underrepresented in the survey results.

Using Facebook ads to sample respondents for surveys or studies can introduce several biases. The user base on Facebook is not representative of the entire migrant population. Users tend to be younger, more urban, and more tech-savvy than the general population, which can lead to an overrepresentation of certain age groups (people in their 30s and 40s), socioeconomic statuses (middle class), and urban residents. People who engage with Facebook ads to participate in surveys might have different levels of engagement and interaction with social media content compared to those who do not. For example, women and people with higher levels of education tend to engage and participate more, which is also true of in-person surveys. Additionally, online surveys such as this one often cannot sample people in precarious situations who have limited access to the internet via mobile phones, including homeless individuals.

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## Appendix

### Appendix A – Sampling

#### *Survey responses*

Of the 5,020 survey responses collected (excluding speeders and those who failed an attention check), almost half of the respondents were born in Poland (46%), with Hungarians (6%) and Romanians (5%) the next most common country of birth groups. The high number of responses from Poles is due to a Polish news website sharing the survey – 39% (1,999) of respondents accessed the survey through this referral link. Looking at other characteristics, the majority are women (71%) or have graduate-level qualifications (54%), while 39% are aged 35 to 44.

Most respondents who answered the survey held an EUSS immigration status. Specifically, 72% had settled status, and another 15% had pre-settled status. Among the remaining respondents, 4% held a work route visa, and 4% had indefinite leave to remain (also known as ILR, permanent residence, or settlement).

A small number of respondents did not know their immigration status (40) or had applied to the EUSS and were either waiting for a response or had their application refused (21). Poles were the largest country of birth group with one of these immigration statuses (21), reflecting the high number of responses from this group. These respondents are also less likely to hold graduate-level qualifications (38%), and just over half could not speak English well or at all.

#### *Weighted sample*

As noted in the Understanding the Evidence section, survey responses were weighted by country of birth (190 countries), gender (men and women), age (18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, and over 65), and education (graduate-level qualification, lower level qualification, other qualification). Note that we used a bespoke version of the Census, provided to us by the Office for National Statistics, to weight the responses – this data comprised information about the characteristics of non-naturalised migrants only.

Figure A1 presents a breakdown of the weighted sample by key characteristics. A little over half of the respondents are women or have graduate-level qualifications, such as an undergraduate or postgraduate degree. Almost 70% were between the ages of 25 and 44 when they completed the survey.

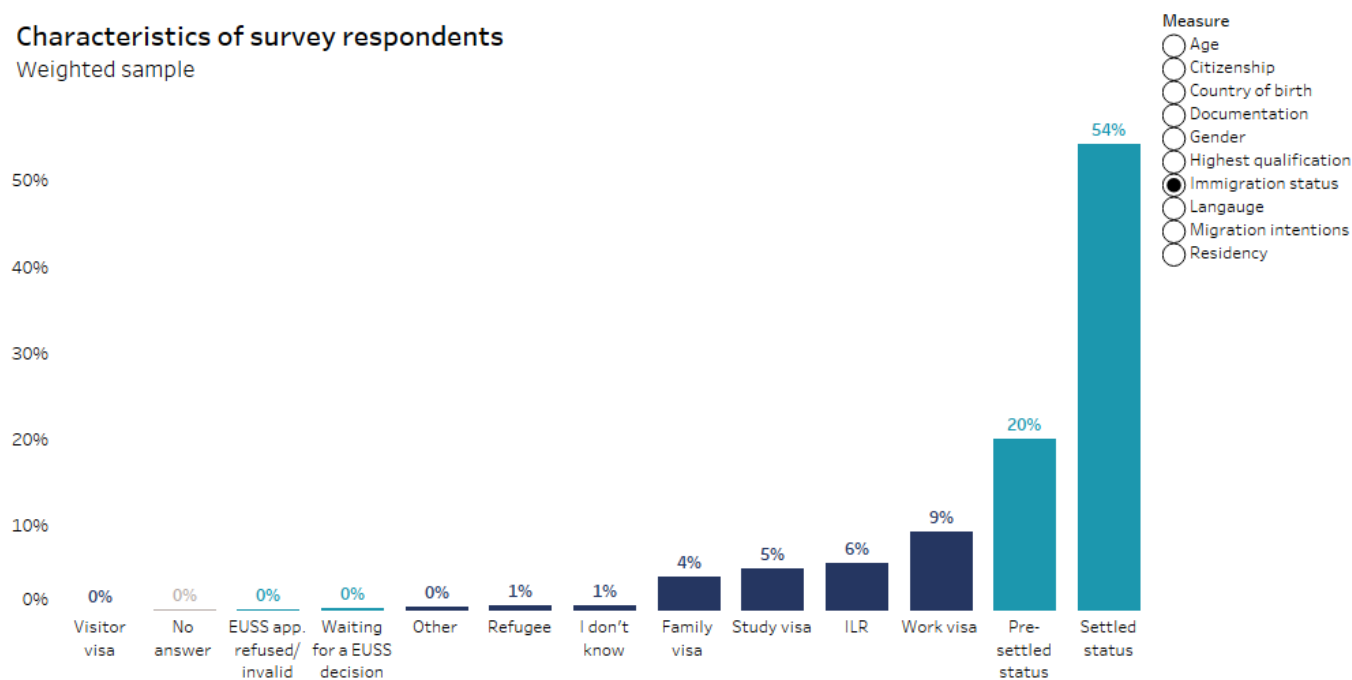
In terms of country of birth, 70 countries are represented in the sample – Poland, Romania, and India are the most common, while 45 countries comprise less than 0.5% of the sample each (i.e., fewer than 25 respondents). More broadly, 74% of the weighted sample were born in EU countries (3,711 respondents). The picture is similar for citizenship, although there are only 47 nationalities represented in the sample, indicating that some respondents had changed their citizenship. However, this only affects a small number of people (182).

The majority of respondents (75%) held a status under the EU Settlement Scheme – indeed, over half of respondents held settled status. This share is less than in the unweighted sample, indicating that migrants from non-EU countries were less likely to respond to the survey. In terms of documentation, almost three-quarters had a digital immigration status, which can be accessed through an app or online.

Figure A1

### Characteristics of survey respondents

Weighted sample



Source: Migration Observatory Lived Experiences of the UK Immigration System survey, 2023.

Note: Citizenship and birth countries are only displayed for those which comprise at least 0.5% of the weighted sample (i.e. 25 respondents). Respondents from USA, Canada, South Africa and Oceania are excluded from the language ability breakdown. Figures are weighted by country of birth, gender, age and education to match the characteristics of the non-naturalised migrant population according to the 2021 Census of England and Wales.



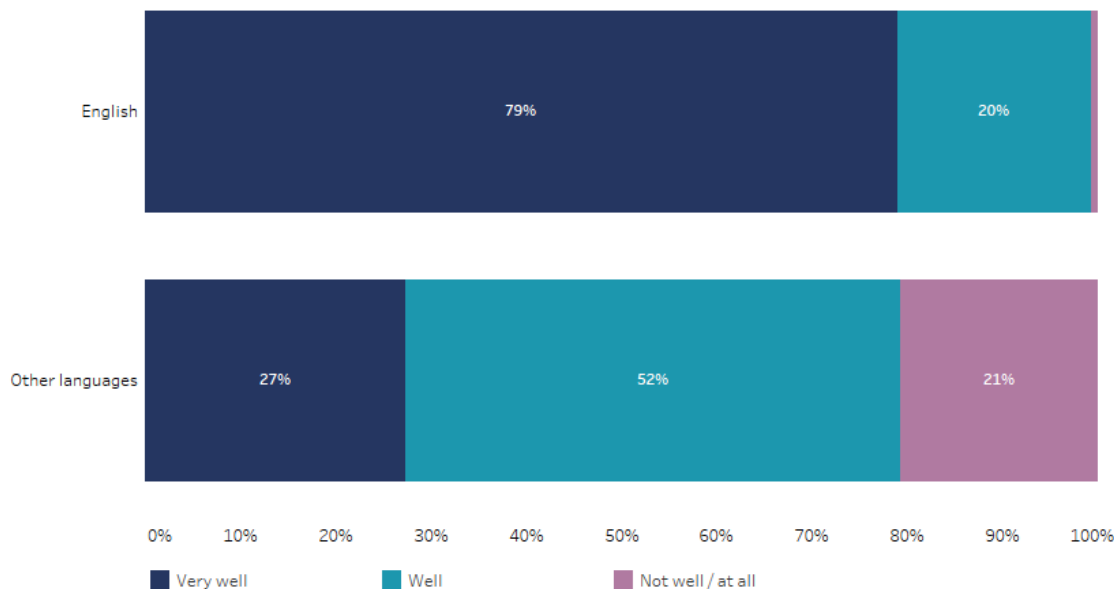
The interaction between these characteristics is displayed in Figure A2. The most striking differences are between respondents who completed the survey in English and those who completed it in the language of their country of birth (see Understanding the Evidence for more information). For example, only 1% of respondents who completed the survey in English could not speak English well or at all, compared to 21% of people who responded in a different language. Those who answered the survey in a different language were considerably more likely to hold an EUSS immigration status, which has no language requirements (94% compared to 57%), and held lower levels of education, on average.

Figure A2

Characteristics of survey respondents

Share of weighted sample

- Display share
- Country of birth
  - Education
  - Gender
  - Immigration status
  - Language ability
  - Residency
- By
- Country of birth
  - Immigration status
  - Survey language



Source: Migration Observatory Lived Experiences of the UK Immigration System survey, 2023.

Note: Respondents from USA, Canada, South Africa and Oceania are excluded from the language ability breakdown. Figures are weighted by country of birth, gender, age and education to match the characteristics of the non-naturalised migrant population according to the 2021 Census of England and Wales.



Appendix B – survey question wording

Question on immigration status

Respondents were directly asked about their immigration status with the following question, which included a brief introduction explaining what an immigration status is:

*The next questions are about your current immigration status. By immigration status we refer to, for example, the type of visa you hold, your settled or pre-settled status, or indefinite leave to remain. Your immigration status gives you the right to enter, live, study, or work in the UK.*

*What is your current immigration status?*

Respondents could choose one of the following response categories:

- *Pre-settled status under the EU Settlement Scheme*
- *Settled status under the EU Settlement Scheme*
- *I applied for status under the EU Settlement Scheme, but I'm waiting for a decision*
- *I applied for status under the EU Settlement Scheme, but my application was refused or considered invalid*
- *Work visa (for example, skilled worker visa, healthcare worker visa, temporary work visa, or start-up visa)*
- *Family visa (for example, spouse or parent visa)*
- *Study visa*
- *Visitor visa*
- *Refugee status, humanitarian protection or discretionary leave to remain*
- *Indefinite leave to remain (ILR) or Settlement (other than settled status under the EU Settlement Scheme)*
- *I have a status/visa, but I don't know which one*
- *Other immigration status*
- *I don't know*
- *I don't want to answer*

### **Application experiences**

Respondents were asked how difficult, stressful, and time-consuming they found the application process on a scale of 1 to 5, where one is 'not at all' and five is 'extremely' (e.g. "How difficult was the application process?").

Figures 3 and 4 show the proportion of respondents who answered 4 ('very') or 5 ('extremely') to each aspect (e.g. 'very' or 'extremely' difficult). It thus represents the share who had a negative experience for each aspect.

### **Confidence at Proving Rights**

To gauge migrants' confidence they could generate a digital share code, people with physical immigration documentation were asked:

*Imagine you're renting a house and the landlord/agency asks you to prove your right to live in the UK with an online share code. How confident are you that you'll be able to get a share code on your own and share it?*

Respondents could state their confidence on a scale of 1 to 5, where one is 'not at all' confident and five is 'extremely' confident. Figure 10 shows the proportion of respondents who answered 1 ('not at all') or 2 ('slightly') and thus represents those who are least confident.

Survey respondents with digital immigration were asked:

*Some people have a physical card showing their immigration status, and others do not. How important would it be for you to have a physical card?*

They could answer on a scale of 1 to 5, where one is 'not at all' important and five is 'extremely' important. Figure 11 shows the share who said 4 ('very') or 5 ('extremely').

Appendix C – further results

**How much help did respondents receive with their application, and who from?**

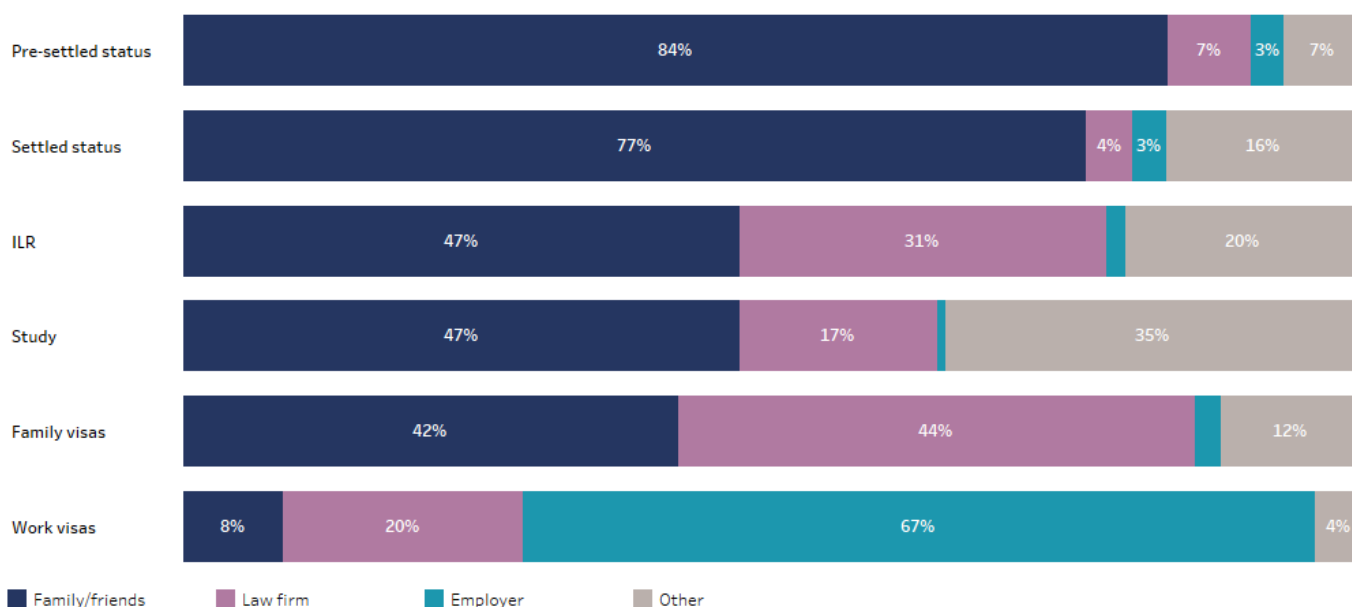
Who respondents turned to help them with their application or complete it on their behalf varied sizably by the type of immigration status they were applying for (Figure A3). Unsurprisingly, people applying for work visas had support from employers, while over a third of applicants for ILR and family visas received help from law firms.

Settled and pre-settled status applicants tended to receive support from family and friends, supporting the idea that these applications are less complex.

Figure A3

**Who applied on respondents' behalf or helped them with their application?**

Weighted sample



Source: Migration Observatory Lived Experiences of the UK Immigration System survey, 2023.

Notes: Figures are weighted by country of birth, gender, age and education to match the characteristics of the non-naturalised migrant population according to the 2021 Census of England and Wales.



Looking specifically at respondents who had help with their application (i.e. not those who had somebody apply on their behalf), different levels of support were given depending on the reason it was received (Figure A4). More help tended to be provided when it was sought due to time constraints—indeed, 42% of respondents who cited ‘quicker decision if somebody helped’ received ‘a lot of help’ with their application. Family migrants were more likely to cite either of these two reasons for having help with their application (32% compared to 10% for all respondents), suggesting that they seek support due to the administrative burden involved in completing the application

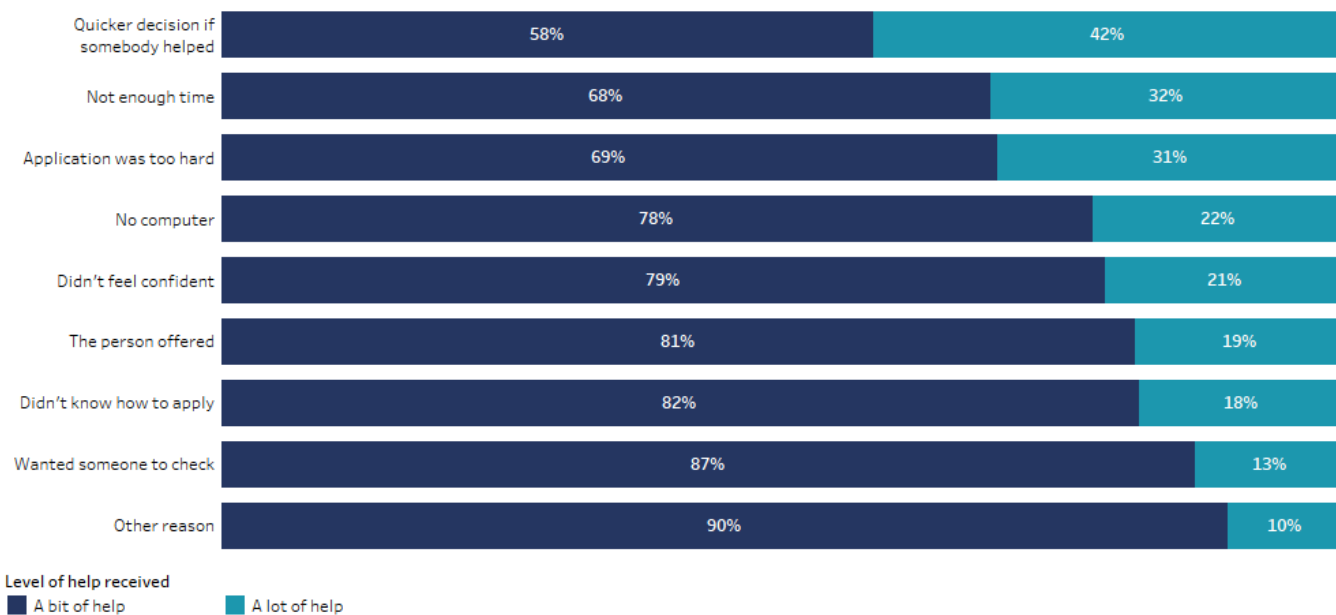
By contrast, the large majority – 87% – of respondents who had help because they wanted someone to check had ‘a bit of help’.



Figure A4

Amount of help received by respondents, by reason for having help

Weighted sample



Source: Migration Observatory Lived Experiences of the UK Immigration System survey, 2023.

Notes: Figures are weighted by country of birth, gender, age and education to match the characteristics of the non-naturalised migrant population according to the 2021 Census of England and Wales.



**Where did respondents experience problems proving their immigration status?**

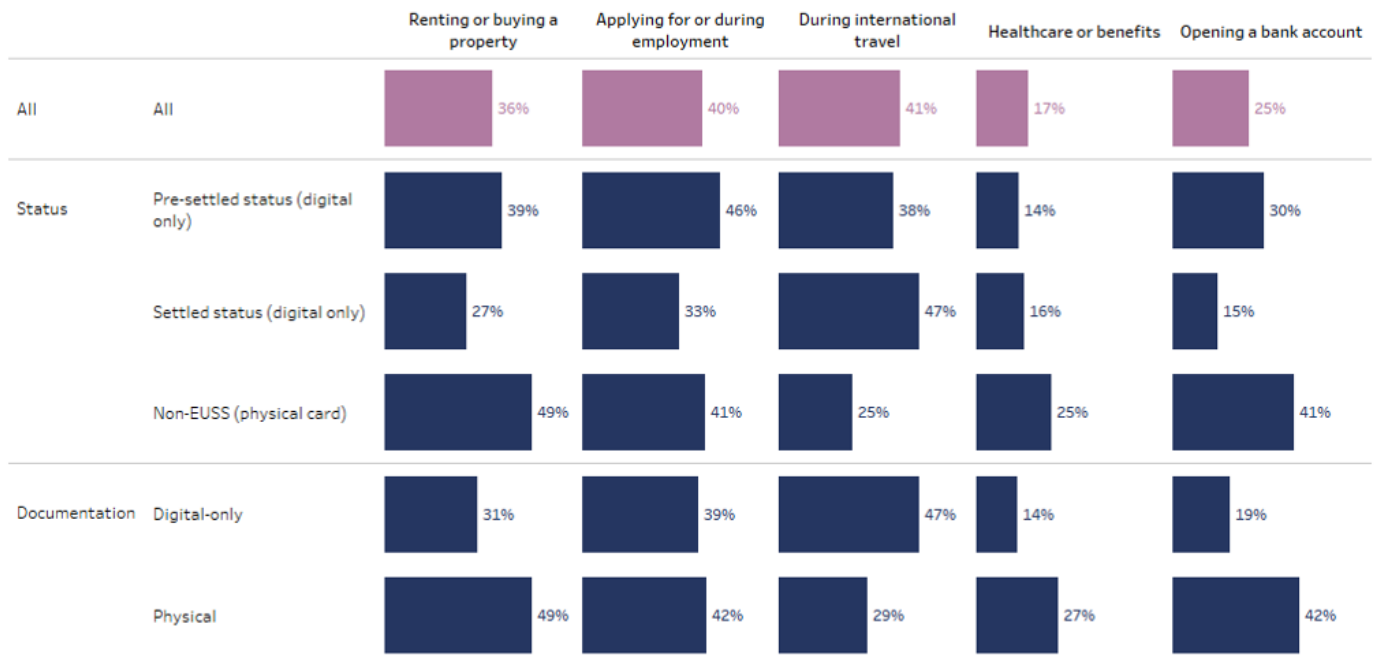
Figure A5 displays the proportion of respondents who experienced a problem proving their immigration status by the scenario in which they encountered a problem. The most common scenarios cited were related to international travel (41%) and employment (40%), while issues were less common when claiming benefits or accessing healthcare (17%).

EUSS status holders – and settled status holders in particular – were considerably more likely to experience issues during international travel.

Figure A5

**Respondent difficulties proving immigration status, by where issue happened**

Share Of respondents who encountered an issue proving their status



Share

- Of all respondents who have had to prove their status
- Of respondents who encountered an issue proving their status

Source: Migration Observatory Lived Experiences of the UK Immigration System survey, 2023.

Notes: Dark blue refers to the subgroup which most commonly experienced an issue or experienced in a given scenario. Figures are weighted by country of birth, gender, age and education to match the characteristics of the non-naturalised migrant population according to the 2021 Census of England and Wales.





## The Migration Observatory

Based at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford, the Migration Observatory provides independent, authoritative, evidence-based analysis of data on migration and migrants in the UK, to inform media, public and policy debates, and to generate high quality research on international migration and public policy issues. The Observatory's analysis involves experts from a wide range of disciplines and departments at the University of Oxford.



## COMPAS

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

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