BRIEFING

Migration to the UK:
Asylum and Resettled Refugees

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This briefing examines asylum and refugee resettlement in the UK. It presents data on the number and characteristics of asylum seekers and resettled refugees, and the outcomes of asylum applications.

Key Points

People who originally came to the UK to seek asylum made up an estimated 0.6% of the UK population in 2018.

Taking into account appeals, 55% of asylum applications from 2012 to 2016 had resulted in a grant of protection by May 2019 – up from 38% at initial decision.

The share of asylum applications receiving an initial decision within six months fell from 73% in Q4 2012 to 25% in Q4 2018.

The UK's regions vary significantly in the numbers of asylum seekers and resettled refugees they host.

The top five most common countries of nationality for asylum seekers in 2018 were Iran, Iraq, Eritrea, Pakistan and Albania.

Two-thirds of resettled refugees in the UK are Syrian nationals.

In 2018, the UK received 6% of asylum applications made in the EU, and ranked 17th among the EU-28 in number of asylum applications as a share of the population.

In the year ending June 2019, around 6,000 people were issued with refugee family reunion visas, and over 2,000 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children received grants of protection or alternative forms of leave.

Understanding the Policy

Asylum is the protection that is granted by a nation-state to a refugee – someone who has left their home country to escape persecution. The United Nations 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defines a refugee as a person who, "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country". An 'asylum seeker' (or 'asylum applicant') is a person who has applied for recognition as a refugee under the Refugee Convention.

A person seeking asylum in the UK must first get to the UK. There is no asylum visa, which means that a person seeking asylum must either arrive irregularly or have a visa that has been issued for another purpose, such as tourism. Applicants will not be granted asylum if the government believes they represent a danger to the UK (Home Office, 2019a, p. 65).

There are three possible outcomes of an initial asylum application. First, an applicant can be recognised as a refugee and granted asylum with five years' leave to remain in the UK, after which they may apply for indefinite leave to remain (ILR). Second, the applicant can be granted an alternative form of protection, known as 'humanitarian protection' (HP), or an alternative form of leave: either 'discretionary leave' (DL), leave under family and private rules, 'Leave Outside the Rules', or 'Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Child (UASC) leave'. Third, the asylum application can be rejected. If an application is rejected, the applicant can appeal against the initial decision. All applications request protection for a 'main applicant', and some include requests for protection for the main applicant's dependants as well.

Right to work and benefits

Asylum seekers are not generally allowed to work in the UK while their claim is being considered. If they are destitute, they can apply for accommodation, as well as asylum support, which is set at £5.39 per day. The Home Office may only grant an asylum applicant permission to work if both (1) their asylum claim has been outstanding for more than 12 months through no fault of the applicant, and (2) the job is on the Shortage Occupation List (which includes a selection of graduate jobs). Campaign groups have argued that asylum seekers and their adult dependents should be able to work after having waited six months for a decision on their claim or further submission (see, for example, Refugee Action, 2018).

Refugee resettlement schemes

Unlike asylum seekers, resettled refugees are identified outside of the UK and brought to the UK with the help of the UK government and the United Nations. Four resettlement schemes are currently in operation, the largest of which is the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS), which aimed to resettle 20,000 Syrian refugees by 2020, which was later expanded to people of any nationality fleeing the Syrian conflict. The Vulnerable Children Resettlement Scheme (VCRS) aimed to resettle 3,000 children from the Middle East and North Africa by 2020.

Refugee family reunion

The UK currently allows a person granted refugee status or humanitarian protection to be joined in the UK by their dependent children (under 18) and a spouse or partner, if they formed a part of the family unit before the refugee fled their country. However, grandparents, parents, siblings and children who are 18 or over are not eligible to join. Campaign groups have argued for a broader definition of who qualifies as a 'family member' for the purposes of refugee family reunion (see, for example, Oxfam International, 2018).

Understanding the Evidence

Data on foreign-born UK residents' main reason for moving to the UK come from the Labour Force Survey, the largest official household survey in the UK. Only one 'main' reason for migration is recorded, though in practice people may have more than one reason for moving. The data reflect self-reported reasons and will not necessarily match people's legal immigration status.

Data on asylum applications and grants of refugee status come from the Home Office. To examine the success rate of asylum claims, this briefing uses the 'final outcomes' of applications. These data provide the outcomes of applications (as of May 2019) for annual cohorts of asylum seekers, taking into account the results of appeals to the First-tier Tribunal (though not higher courts). In recognising that initially negative decisions can be overturned on appeal, these data provide a better indication of success rates than data on initial decisions. Because final grant rates vary slightly year on year, we calculate a five-year average for the period 2012 to 2016. Data for 2017 and 2018 are not included because large numbers of applications submitted in the most recent years are still awaiting a decision, the outcomes of which may change the grant rates.

The only available data on the location of asylum seekers, which is available for UK regions and local authorities, is for those who are receiving government support (specifically, 'section 95' support) that includes the provision of accommodation. This support is given only to asylum seekers who are destitute and so these data may not reflect the location of all asylum seekers. Local authority data for those in receipt of section 95 support are based on the registered address of the asylum seeker, which may not be the location at which the individual regularly resides. For resettled refugees, location data refer to the refugees' initial receiving local authority, which they may later leave. Asylum seekers in receipt of support under 'section 4(2)' are also provided with accommodation, but data are not available on their location.

People who originally came to the UK to seek asylum made up an estimated 0.6% of the UK population in 2018

An estimated 361,000 people living in the UK in 2018 had originally come to the UK to seek asylum – equivalent to 0.6% of the total population, according to Migration Observatory analysis of the Labour Force Survey. Of these, 61% had lived in the UK for more than 15 years. Almost one third of these residents had lived in the UK for between 16 to 20 years (Figure 1).

Figure 1

How long have people who came to the UK to seek asylum lived in the country for?
As at 2018
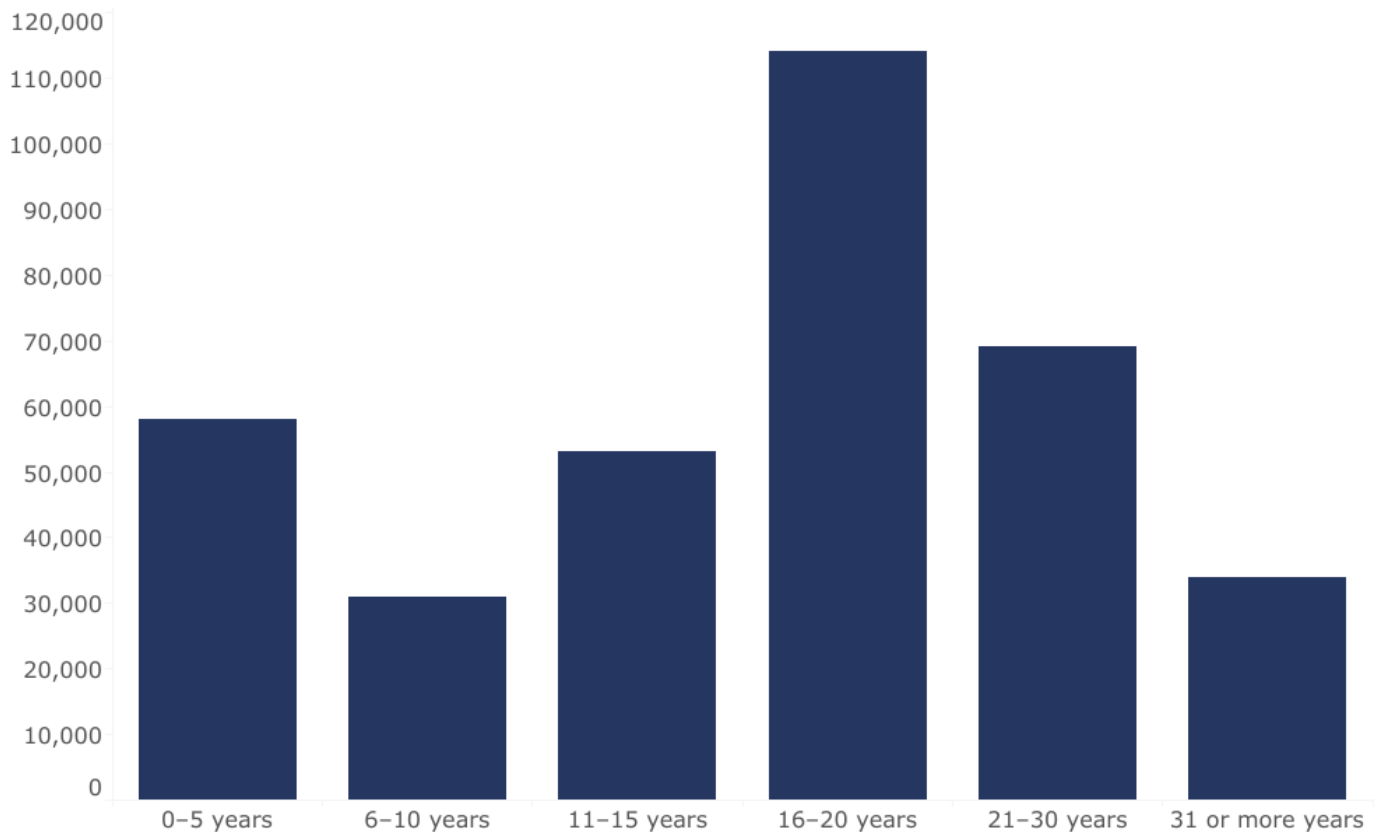
To Embed this graphic: Click the share icon and insert the Embed Code as HTML code into your webpage.
Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Labour Force Survey, 2018 (weighted average of four quarters).
Notes: These data are for Great Britain only and do not include Northern Ireland. Includes participants who said their main reason for migrating was to seek asylum.
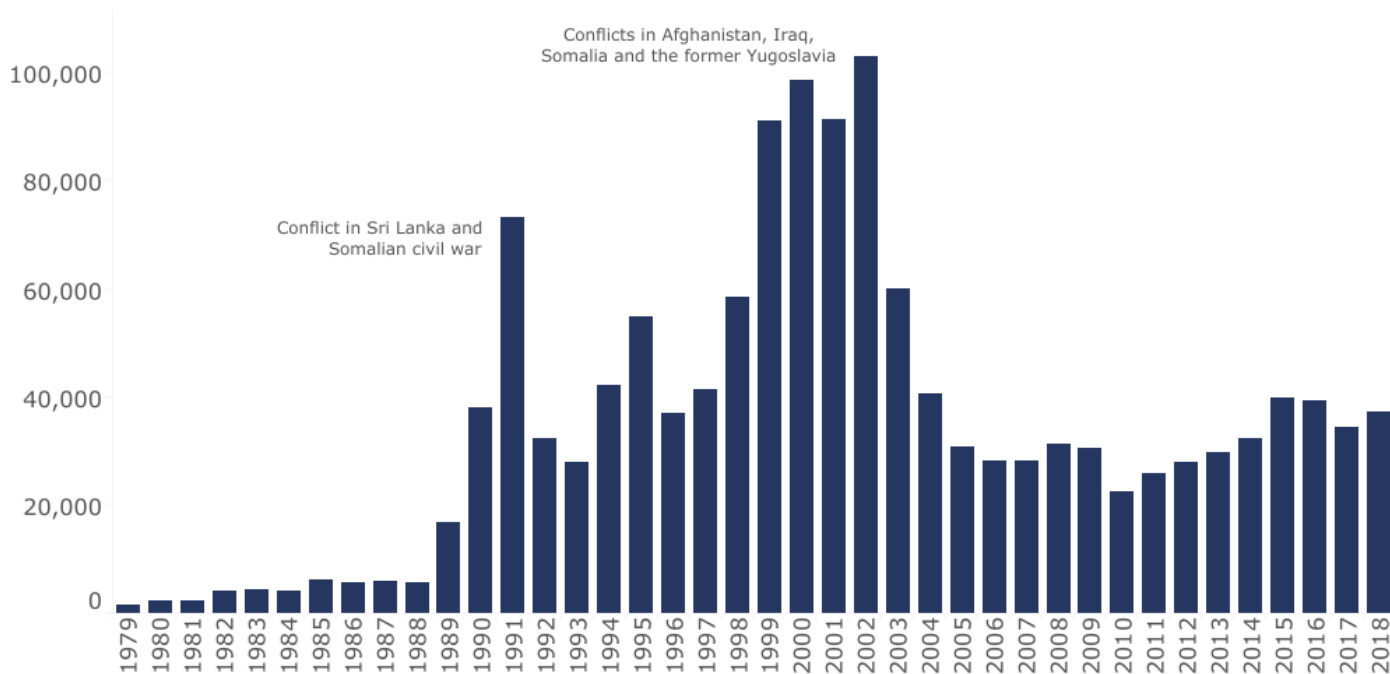
These data include those granted protection or an alternative form of leave, or who remained in the UK without legal immigration status. They partly reflect the increase in asylum applications and grants of asylum during the late 1990s and early 2000s (Figure 2).

Figure 2.a

Asylum seekers, and grants of asylum or other leave, UK, 1979 to 2018
Main applicants and dependants

Select a chart:
◉ Asylum seekers
○ Grants

Source: For "Asylum seekers" and "Asylum or other leave": Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office 'Immigration Statistics, year ending March 2019', Asylum tables, as_02. For "Resettlement": Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office 'Immigration Statistics, year ending March 2019', Asylum tables, as_19_q.
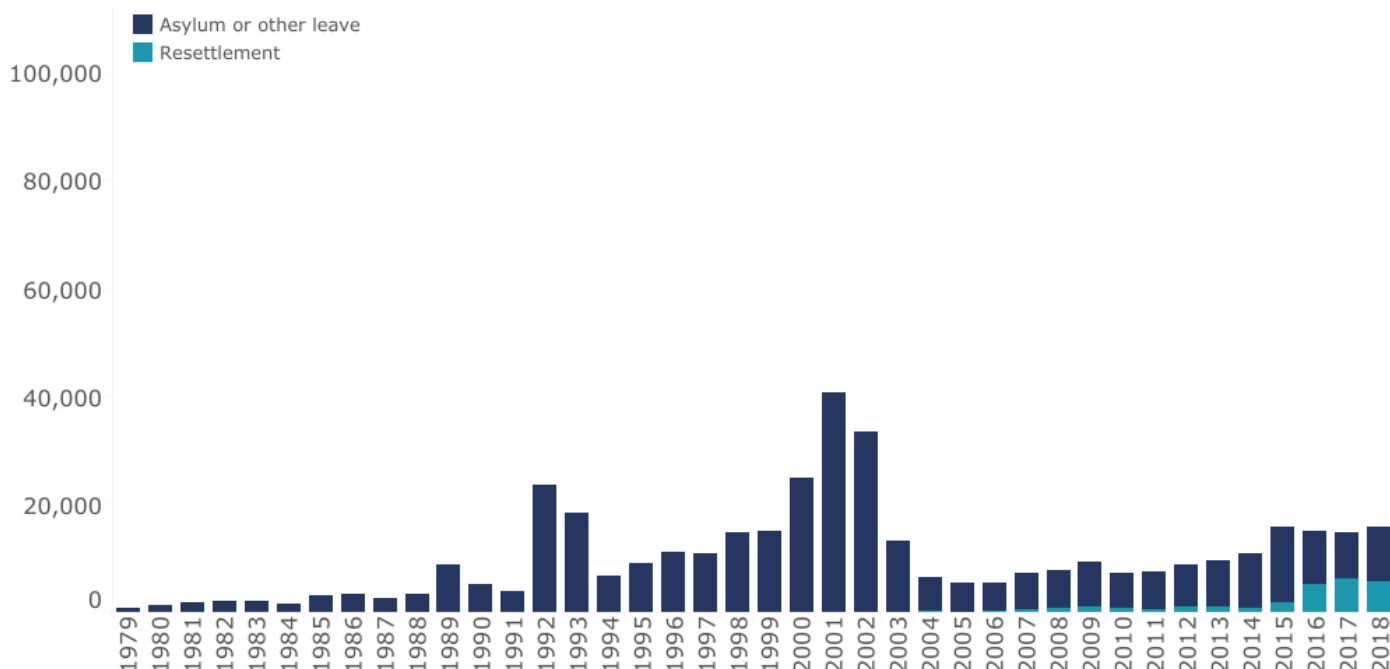Notes: "Other leave" comprises the following grants that resulted from an asylum application: humanitarian protection, discretionary leave, grants under family and private life rules, leave outside the rules, Calais Leave, and UASC leave. These grants are at initial decision; the number of grants at final decision (following appeal) will be higher. Resettlement data are for refugees resettled under the Gateway Protection Programme, Mandate scheme, VPRS, and VCRS. "Grants" refers to grants of asylum or other forms of leave such as humanitarian protection or discretionary leave *at initial decision*. This does not take into account appeals, which increase grants significantly.

Figure 2.b

Asylum seekers, and grants of asylum or other leave, UK, 1979 to 2018
Main applicants and dependants

Select a chart:
○ Asylum seekers
◉ Grants

Source: For "Asylum seekers" and "Asylum or other leave": Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office 'Immigration Statistics, year ending March 2019', Asylum tables, as_02. For "Resettlement": Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office 'Immigration Statistics, year ending March 2019', Asylum tables, as_19_q.
Notes: "Other leave" comprises the following grants that resulted from an asylum application: humanitarian protection, discretionary leave, grants under family and private life rules, leave outside the rules, Calais Leave, and UASC leave. These grants are at initial decision; the number of grants at final decision (following appeal) will be higher. Resettlement data are for refugees resettled under the Gateway Protection Programme, Mandate scheme, VPRS, and VCRS. "Grants" refers to grants of asylum or other forms of leave such as humanitarian protection or discretionary leave *at initial decision*. This does not take into account appeals, which increase grants significantly.

Change in the number of asylum seekers over time is driven by geopolitical events, since asylum seekers come mainly from countries embroiled in political and military conflicts (Crawley, 2010). For example, the spike in people who came to the UK to seek asylum between 16 and 20 years before 2018 – that is, from 1998 to 2002 – were mainly nationals of Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and the former Yugoslavia, all sites of war.

From 2010 to 2018, 67% of all asylum seekers were male, and 66% of all grants of asylum or other leave at initial decision were to men or boys (Asylum applications and Initial decisions and resettlement datasets, respectively).

An analysis of the composition of grants over time by nationality can be found in the House of Commons Library briefing on Asylum statistics (Sturge, 2019, p. 12).

Taking into account appeals, 55% of asylum applications from 2012 to 2016 had received a grant of protection or other form of leave by May 2019 – up from 38% at initial decision

Of all applications received in the period 2012 to 2016 with a known outcome as of May 2019 (116,390, which excludes withdrawn applications), 38% resulted in a grant of asylum, humanitarian protection, or another form of leave at initial decision.

Over this period, around three-quarters (78%) of the applicants who were rejected at the initial decision stage appealed. Of these appeals with a known outcome, 40% were successful. This increased the grant rate from 38% at initial decision to 55% after appeal (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Final outcomes of asylum applications
Includes only asylum applications received in 2012 to 2016 inclusive with a known outcome, and excludes withdrawn applications
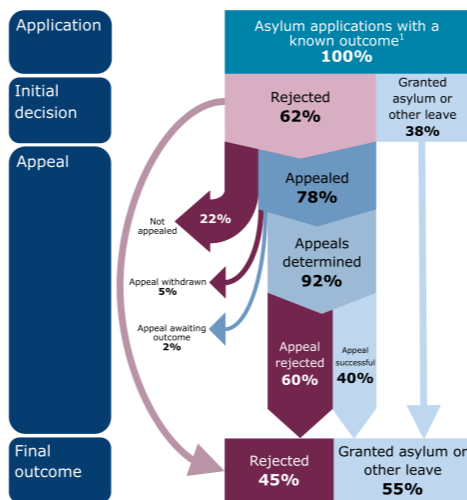
Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Outcome analysis of asylum applications. This figure is adapted from Home Office (2019b), with additional inspiration from Sturge (2019).
Notes: "Applications" is equivalent to "main applicants" and excludes dependants. "Granted asylum or other leave" means granted asylum, HP, DL, or other form of leave, such as UASC leave. 'Appealed' is the share of all applications that were rejected at initial decision, even though in some cases an individual may appeal a 'positive' initial decision, to seek a stronger form of leave. Excludes cases withdrawn or pending initial decision. Results of appeals beyond the First-tier Tribunal are not included.

For applications with known outcomes, successful appeals have increased grant rates by between 8 and 17 percentage points each year from 2012 to 2016 (Figure 4).

Changes in grant rates following appeal are in part the result of changes in the success rate of appeals. The share of concluded appeals that were successful increased from a low of 33% in 2012 to a high of 45% in 2015.

Figure 4

How do appeals against initial decisions affect overall grant rates?
For asylum applications received from 2012 to 2016, as at May 2019
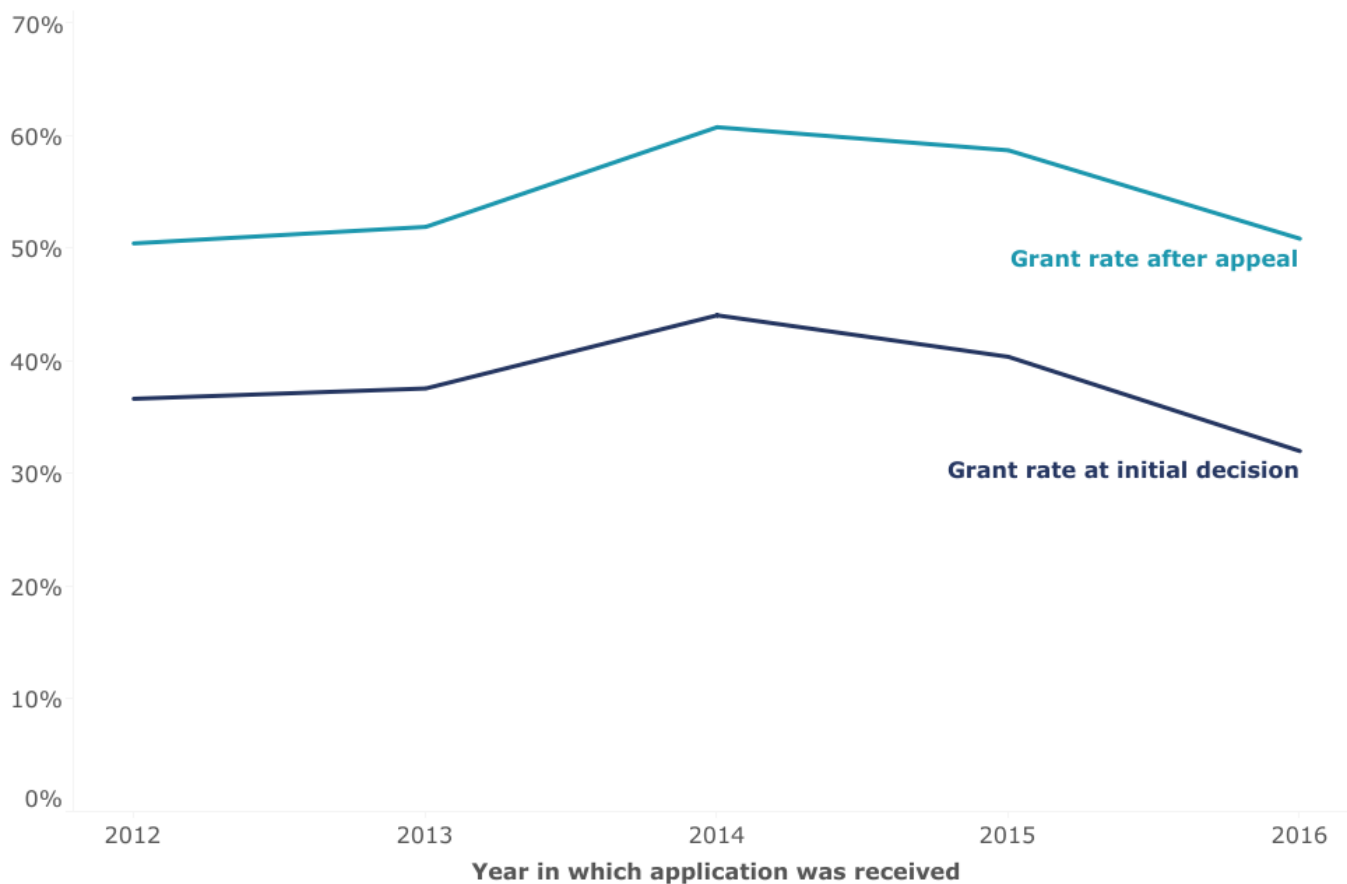
Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Outcome analysis of asylum applications.
Notes: Grant rate refers to the share of main applicants granted asylum or another form of protection such as humanitarian protection or discretionary leave by May 2019. Excludes withdrawn applications and cases awaiting a final outcome.
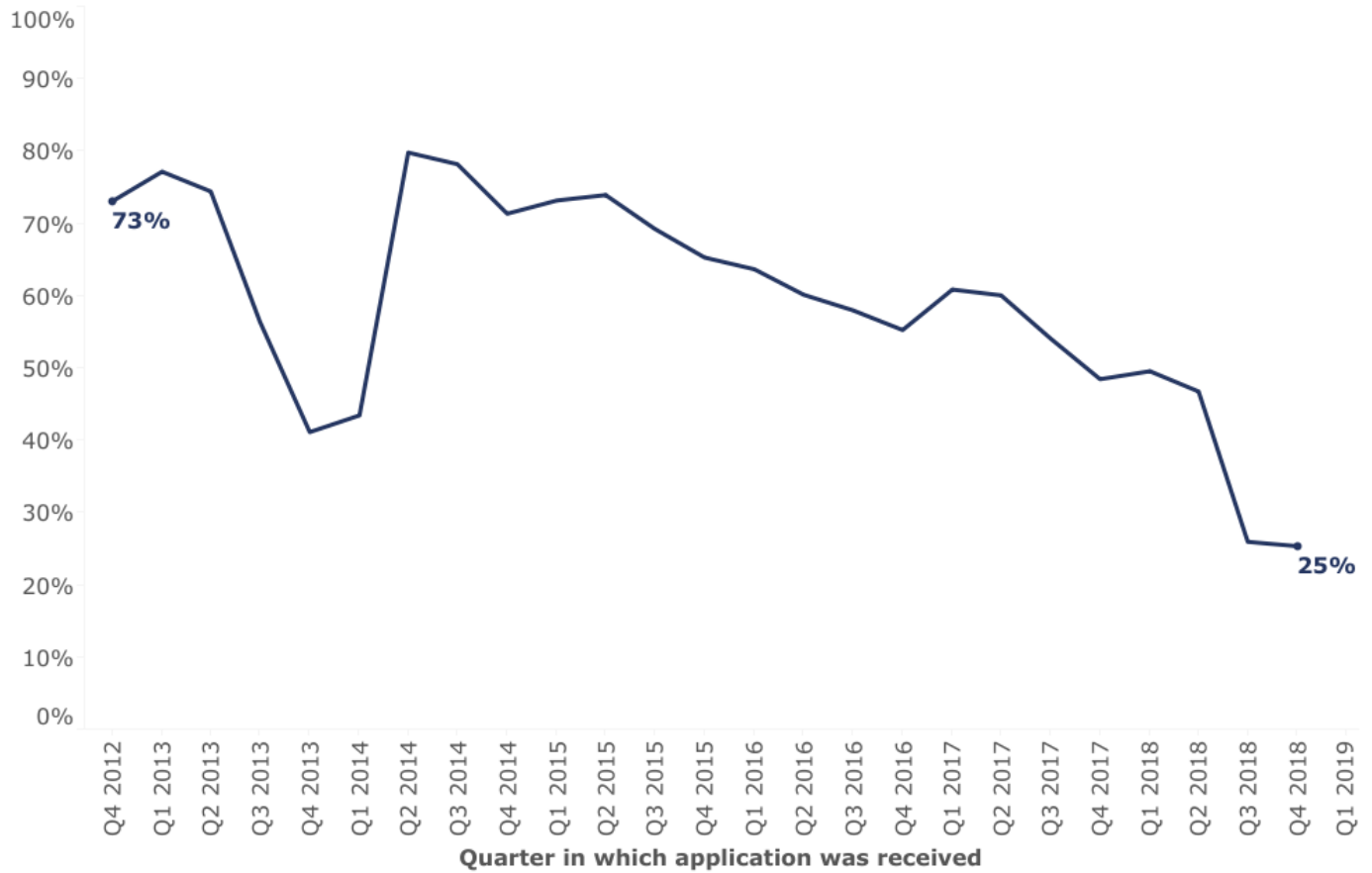
The share of asylum applications receiving an initial decision within six months has fallen from 73% in 2012 Q4 to 25% in 2018 Q4

The time it takes for asylum seekers to receive an initial decision on their applications has increased substantially in recent years. In the fourth quarter of 2012, 73% of applications received an initial decision within six months – compared with 25% in the last quarter of 2018 (Figure 5).

There are several possible explanations for this trend. Factors that are likely to influence the duration of asylum applications include the number of applications received; changes in administrative policy and management, including the end of the 'detained fast track' programme in 2015; resource constraints or capacity; and the shifting characteristics of applicants themselves, with some claims taking longer to resolve than others. In early 2019, the Home Office dropped its 6-month 'service standard' for asylum claims, citing the desire to prioritise cases involving vulnerable applicants and those where an initial decision needed to be reconsidered (Allison and Taylor, 2019).

Figure 5

Share of asylum applications receiving an initial decision within 6 months
Per quarter (calendar years), adult main applicants only

Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office asylum transparency data Q3 2014 Asy_1q, and Q1 2017 to Q2 2019 Asy_10. Notes: From 2014 Q2 to 2018 Q2, the share of asylum applications that receive an initial decision within six months is given by dividing the total number of applications received per quarter by the number of "straightforward" applications that received an initial decision within six months. This assumes that all non-straightforward applications do not receive an initial decision within six months.

As at 30 June 2019, just under 32,000 people seeking asylum (both main applicants and dependants) were awaiting an initial decision on their claim, of whom just under 17,000 (or 53%) had been waiting for more than 6 months. A further 6,700 were awaiting the result of an appeal. (Figures, respectively, from Home Office immigration statistics 'Asylum applications awaiting a decision; and Asylum Transparency Data table ASY_03).

The UK's regions vary significantly in the numbers of asylum seekers and resettled refugees they host

At the end of June 2019, there were around 45,200 asylum seekers in receipt of 'section 95 support' in the UK, of whom almost 42,200 were living in dispersed accommodation, which among other things aims to house asylum seekers away from London and the South East. The regions of the UK with the fewest asylum seekers as a share of their populations were the South East and East of England, both 0.01%. The region with the most asylum seekers as a share of its population was the North East, at 0.19% (Figure 6). The local authority with the most asylum seekers was Glasgow City, with 4,019 at the end of June 2019.

Out of the UK's 382 unitary and lower-tier local authorities, 214 were recorded as having at least one asylum seeker registered there as at 30 June 2019, meaning that 168 (44%) were recorded as having no asylum seeker registered (although the data also include 206 asylum seekers in an "Unknown" local authority, who could be registered in any local authority). Just 35 local authorities, less than 10% of the total, hosted 73% of all asylum seekers on section 95 support. These issues are discussed in more detail in the Migration Observatory's local data guide.

The UK also hosts resettled refugees. From January 2014 to June 2019, 17,051 people were resettled in the UK under the VPRS, or 85% of the target figure of 20,000 by 2020. The VCRS resettled 1,625 children from late 2016 onwards – 54% of the target of 3,000 by 2020 (Home Office, 2019c).

Northern Ireland has hosted the largest number of these resettled refugees as a share of its population (0.08%), while the East of England and London have hosted the fewest: 0.01% of their respective populations.

Figure 6

Where do asylum seekers and resettled refugees live in the UK?
By region as a share of population, and by local authority (absolute numbers), as at 30 June 2019

Select visualisation:
◉ Regional bar chart
◯ Local authority map
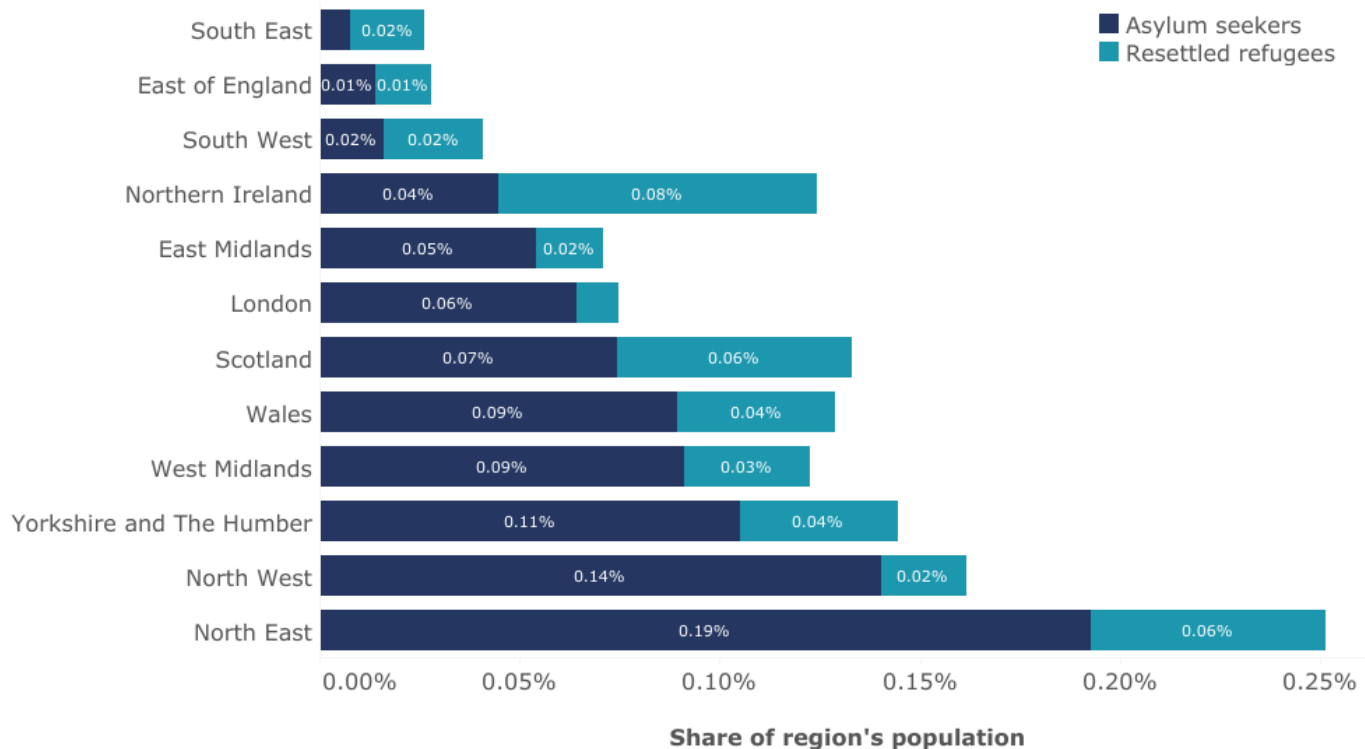
Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Resettlement by Local Authority, and Section 95 support by local authority. Notes: Asylum seekers includes main applicants and dependants. Data is based on the registered address of the asylum seeker and the initial receiving local authority for refugees resettled from 2014 to 30 June 2019, who may later move to another part of the UK. Excludes people on Section 4 support. Data on resettled refugees include VPRS and VCRS only, and exclude other settlement schemes (Gateway and Mandate).

The top five most common countries of nationality for asylum seekers in 2018 were Iran, Iraq, Eritrea, Pakistan and Albania

In 2018, 31% of main asylum applicants were nationals of Middle East or Central Asian countries (mainly Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan), 29% African countries (mainly Eritrea, Sudan, and Libya; includes North Africa), 18% South Asian countries (mainly Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh), and 11% Non-EU European countries (a large majority Albanian). Less than 13% of main applicants were from East Asia, Southeast Asia, the Americas, Oceania and other parts of the world (Figure 7).

Figure 7.a

Asylum applications, and grants of asylum or other leave, by nationality, UK, 2001 to 2018
Main applicants by region of nationality
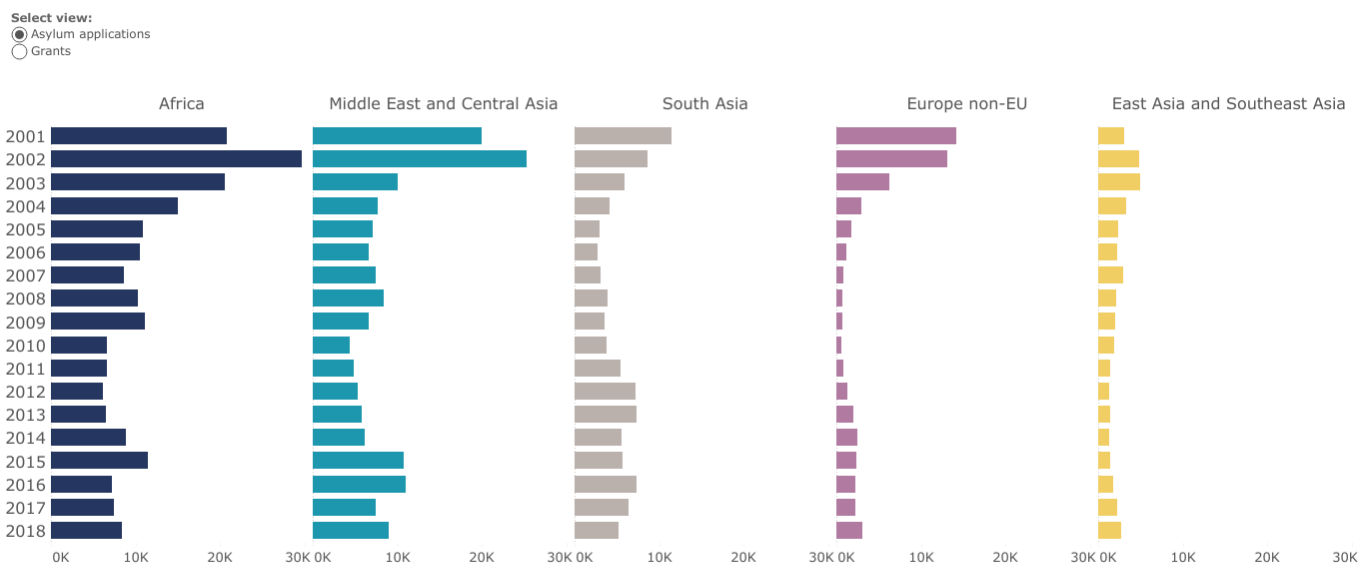
Source: Home Office Immigration Statistics, year ending March 2019, Asylum tables, Table as_01.
Notes: Africa includes North Africa. Oceania, the Americas, and the few remaining other countries are not shown due to small numbers. For details on countries included in each region see Home Office (2019a, pp. 129–134).

Figure 7.b

Asylum applications, and grants of asylum or other leave, by nationality, UK, 2001 to 2018
Main applicants by region of nationality

Source: Home Office Immigration Statistics, year ending March 2019, Asylum tables, Table as_01.
Notes: Africa includes North Africa. Oceania, the Americas, and the few remaining other countries are not shown due to small numbers. For details on countries included in each region see Home Office (2019a, pp. 129–134).

In 2018, the most common countries of nationality of main asylum applicants were Iran (3,320), Iraq (2,700), Eritrea (2,151), Pakistan (2,033), and Albania (2,005) (Table 1).

The final grant rate varies significantly by nationality. In the five-year period 2012–2016, the share of Eritrean nationals who had received a grant of asylum or other form of leave by May 2019 was 88%, while it was 5% for Indian nationals (Table 1).

Table 1

Nationality of asylum seekers to the UK: the top ten most common in 2018
For main applicants, excluding dependants

Rank	Country	No. main applicants	Share of all applicants	Share granted protection
1	Iran	3,320	11%	70%
2	Iraq	2,700	9%	43%
3	Eritrea	2,151	7%	88%
4	Pakistan	2,033	7%	33%
5	Albania	2,005	7%	42%
6	Sudan	1,611	5%	89%
7	Afghanistan	1,349	5%	59%
8	India	1,321	4%	5%
9	Bangladesh	1,297	4%	18%
10	Vietnam	1,215	4%	48%

Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Asylum and Resettlement – Summary Tables, Sheet Asy_01b.
Notes: (1) The percentage of main applicants who had received a grant of asylum or other form of protection by May 2019, excluding withdrawn applications and those with unknown outcome.

Two-thirds of resettled refugees in the UK are Syrian nationals

Of the roughly 26,000 refugees resettled in the UK since 2010 under the four settlement schemes listed above in 'Understanding the Policy', 74% (19,176) were nationals of Middle Eastern countries, and 19% (4,990) were nationals of sub-Saharan African countries (as at 30 June 2019). The remaining 7% (1,780) were from the rest of the world.

The top ten most common countries of nationality of resettled refugees in the UK make up 97% of the total (Table 2).

Table 2

Nationality of resettled refugees in the UK: the top ten most common
Resettled refugees arriving in the UK from 1 Jan 2010 to 30 June 2019

Rank	Country of nationality	No. resettled refugees	Share of all resettled refugees
1	Syria	17,017	66%
2	Iraq	1,856	7%
3	Somalia	1,810	7%
4	Democratic Republic of Congo	1,757	7%
5	Sudan	1,072	4%
6	Ethiopia	1038	4%
7	Eritrea	240	1%
8	Occupied Palestinian Territories	231	1%
9	South Sudan	115	0.4%
10	Iran	48	0.2%

Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Initial decisions and resettlement.
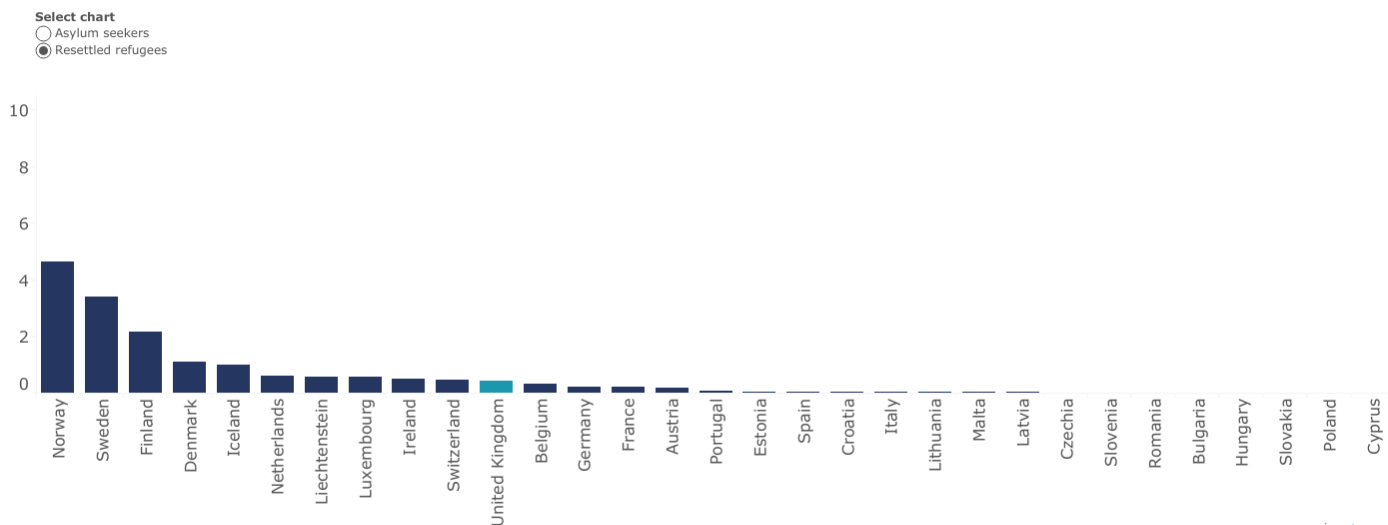Notes: Includes VPRS, VCRS, Gateway Protection Programme, and Mandate scheme.

In 2018, the UK received 6% of asylum applications made in the EU, and ranked 17th among the EU-28 in number of applications as a share of the population

In 2018, Germany received the most asylum seekers (including dependants) among EU countries: 184,180 applicants or 29% of the EU total. This was followed by France (120,425, 19%), Greece (66,965, 10%), Italy (59,950, 9%), Spain (54,050, 8%) and the United Kingdom (37,730, 6%). Together, these top five countries received 81% of all asylum applications across the EU-28 (144,000 out of 184,670) (Eurostat, 2019).

In 2018, the UK received 0.6 asylum applications for every 1,000 residents, compared to 1.2 applications per thousand residents across the whole of the EU-28. On this measure, the UK ranks 17th in the EU and 14th in the EU-15, with only Portugal receiving fewer asylum applications per person (Figure 8).

Figure 8.a

Asylum seekers, and resettled refugees, per 1,000 population
Asylum seekers in 2018, resettled refugees as at May 2019, for the EU-28 and Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland

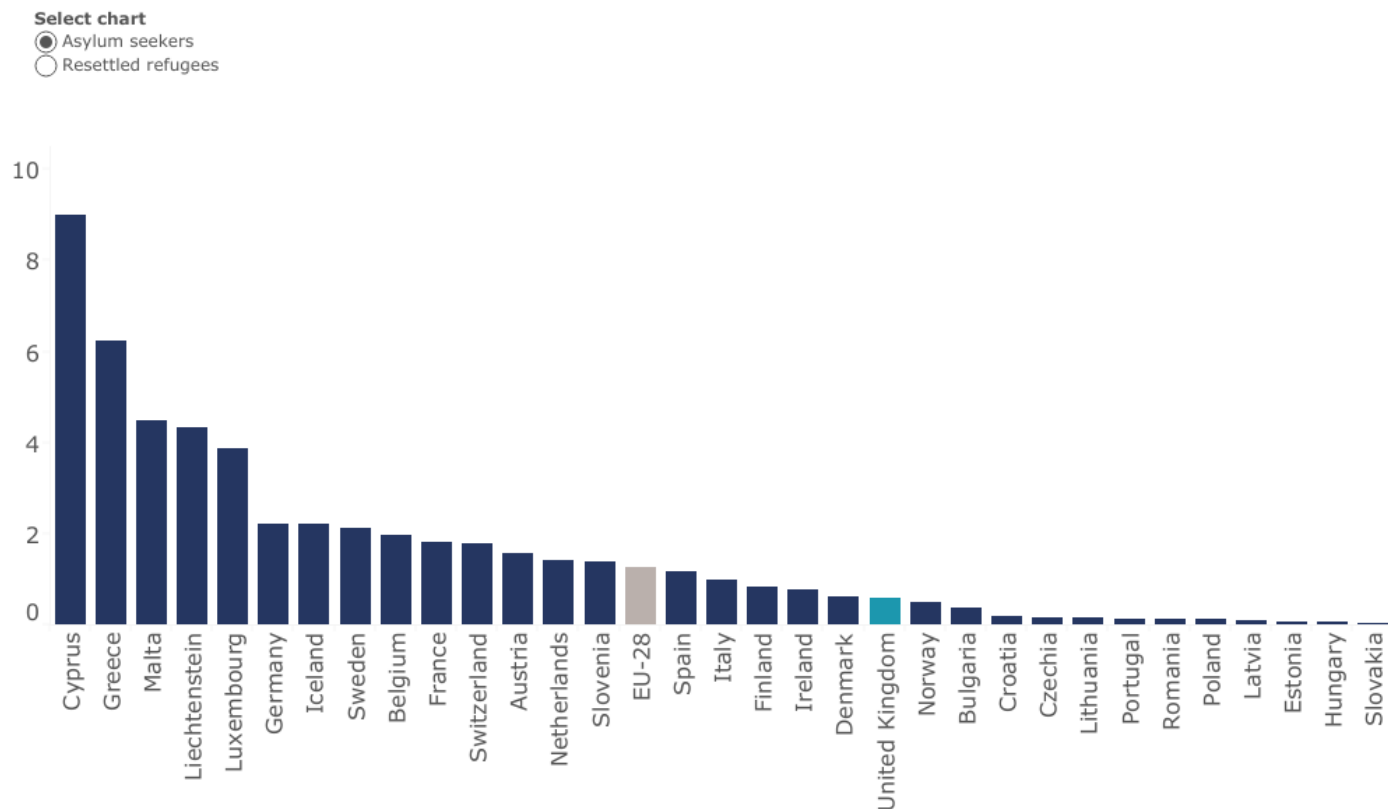**Select chart**
○ Asylum seekers
◉ Resettled refugees

Source: For asylum seekers: Eurostat, Asylum and first time asylum applicants by citizenship, age and sex Annual aggregated data [migr_asyappctza]. For resettled refugees: UNHCR Resettlement Data Finder. For population estimates: Eurostat, Population by age and sex [demo_pjan].
Notes: Figures for asylum seekers are for main applicants and dependants and hence comprise all people seeking asylum. The population estimates are as at 1 Jan 2018. The figure for "EU-28" is the average (mean).

Figure 8.b

Asylum seekers, and resettled refugees, per 1,000 population
Asylum seekers in 2018, resettled refugees as at May 2019, for the EU-28 and Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland

Select chart
◉ Asylum seekers
○ Resettled refugees

Source: For asylum seekers: Eurostat, Asylum and first time asylum applicants by citizenship, age and sex Annual aggregated data [migr_asyappctza]. For resettled refugees: UNHCR Resettlement Data Finder. For population estimates: Eurostat, Population by age and sex [demo_pjan].
Notes: Figures for asylum seekers are for main applicants and dependants and hence comprise all people seeking asylum. The population estimates are as at 1 Jan 2018. The figure for "EU-28" is the average (mean).

These figures do not include resettled refugees, however. In absolute terms, the UK hosts the second largest number of resettled refugees in the EU, after Sweden, and ranks 7th across the EU in refugees hosted per one thousand population (Figure 8: Resettled refugees).

In the year ending June 2019, around 6,000 people were issued with family reunion visas, and over 2,000 UASCs received grants of protection or alternative forms of leave

In the year ending June 2019, 5,993 people (49% aged under 18) were issued a family reunion visa, to join their refugee spouse, partner or parent in the UK. This made up 4% of all visas issued for family reasons that year. Of these, 49% (2,913) were children under the age of 18 (Home Office, 2019d).

In the nine-year period from 2010 to 2019, an average of 4,803 people were issued with family reunion visas per year.

An unaccompanied asylum-seeking child (UASC) is a person under 18 who is applying for asylum in the UK in their own right, is separated from both parents, and is not being cared for by a relative or guardian in the UK. From 2010 to 2018, there were 14,069 initial decisions on applications from UASC, of which 73% (10,336) granted asylum or another form of protection. In this nine-year period, an average of 1,148 UASC received grants of protection at initial decision.

Evidence Gaps and Limitations

We do not know how many people the UK has ever granted asylum or another form of protection to, because published statistics go back only as far as 1984. Moreover, these published statistics record the outcomes only of initial decisions and do not take into account appeals, which significantly increase the number of people that are ultimately granted protection.

Nor do we have clear information on how long asylum applications take. Data are provided on the share of applications receiving an initial decision within 6 months, and on the number of applications currently pending, but it is not possible with existing data to calculate how long it takes the 'average' asylum application to receive an initial decision or final outcome.

There is also limited information on what happens to refused asylum applicants. Some depart under assistance or supervision by the government, for which data are available. However, others depart without notifying the authorities, or remain in the UK as irregular migrants. Departures data has improved in the past few years due in part to the introduction of 'exit checks' in 2015. However, significant data gaps remain for earlier cohorts.

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Related material

Migration Observatory briefing – Settlement in the UK

The Migration Observatory

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

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