Chapter 3

The growth in migration to the UK and its effects on housing

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Migration to the UK reached record levels in 2022 and prompted enormous controversy and political debate. Will migration continue at these levels? What impact is it having on the housing system? As the UK government continues to tighten migrant access to government benefits and services, how does this affect their ability to find satisfactory accommodation?

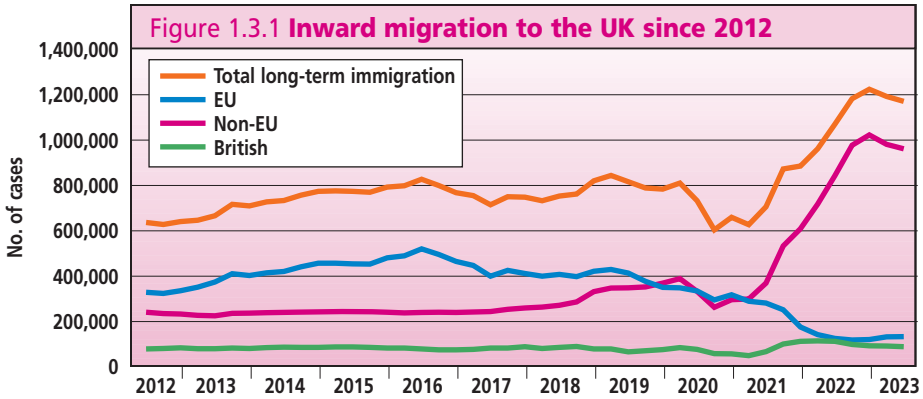
This chapter looks at the evidence on how the housing system is dealing with the growth of migration, and at the consequences for recent migrants of an already strained housing system and of the ever-worsening 'hostile environment' that they have to navigate.

Migration at record levels – but will this continue?

In November 2023, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) withdrew its original estimate of net migration to the UK in 2022 and replaced it with one that was 23 per cent higher. The updated estimate, that net migration totalled 745,000, reflected continuing ONS efforts to make immigration statistics more accurate.[1] It resulted from new estimates that 1.23 million people entered the country on a long-term basis in 2022, while 485,000 moved abroad. The revisions took account of 'unexpected patterns' of migrant behaviour, such as students staying longer and more workers bringing dependants with them.

By June 2023, the pattern had shifted slightly. Figure 1.3.1 shows inward migration falling to 1.18 million for the twelve months to June 2023. It also shows clearly how the proportion of EU and non-EU migrants has changed markedly, with the former declining after the 2016 referendum and the latter driving the growth in immigration since the pandemic ended. There were unusual factors driving the surge in immigration over the last two years, including a 'bounce-back' effect from the restrictions in place during the pandemic. Most of the growth is accounted for by larger numbers using the official routes to travel from outside the EU to work and study in the UK. The *New Statesman* called this a 'secret workforce' which is 'plugging gaps in understaffed sectors in Britain', via visas for 'shortage occupations'.[2] Five construction-work occupations were added to the shortage list in the March Budget, but by far the biggest growth in numbers is of those working in health or social care, accounting for nearly 70 per cent of skilled worker visas.

Figure 1.3.1 **Inward migration to the UK since 2012**



Source: ONS Long-term international migration, provisional estimate: year ending June 2023.
Note: Figures for 2022/23 are provisional.

Numbers have also increased as a result of people using official routes to flee crises in Afghanistan, Hong Kong and Ukraine. However, those seeking asylum who arrive by 'irregular' routes, and on which much of the debate really focuses, only form eight per cent of total immigration; of these, only about half arrive on 'small boats'. Asylum seekers' contribution to the figure (90,000 arrivals) is similar to that of returning British nationals (84,000).

Despite these high levels of migration, forecasters appear confident that recent experience is exceptional and net migration will fall to much lower levels, similar to those obtaining before the pandemic. ONS population projections (which predate the most recent immigration figures) assume that net migration will level out at 245,000 per year and the Office of Budget Responsibility applies the same assumption in its economic forecasts. The Migration Observatory also agrees but settles on a higher estimate, that net migration will fall to 350,000 by 2030, roughly to its pre-Brexit level.[3]

How are these likely falls explained? By far the biggest reason is the expected *emigration* of many of those who have recently arrived in the UK to work and study, as a large proportion return home after a few years. In other words, much of the current upsurge of immigration should, after a delay, produce an equivalent

upsurge of emigration. There are, of course, many unknown factors: for example, a stagnant economy may make the UK job market less attractive to migrant workers.

Nevertheless, whether it levels off at 250,000 or 350,000, net migration will affect population numbers, especially because UK levels of births and deaths are almost in balance, meaning that most population growth results from migration. The latest ONS population projection for the UK is that it will grow by 6.6 million between 2021 and 2026, and that 91.8 per cent of this growth will result from net migration. So far there have been no new projections of numbers of households based on these figures.[4] It therefore remains to be seen to what extent higher net migration figures are forecast to feed through to higher housing demand.

Migrants and the housing market – an overview

The ways in which new arrivals to the UK interact with the housing market show well established trends, summarised periodically by the Migration Observatory:[5]

- People born abroad have lower homeownership rates than the UK-born (47 per cent, as against 70 per cent), and are more likely to be living in the PRS.
- Recent migrants are almost three times as likely to be renters compared to other migrants. The tenure of people who migrated to the UK over 20 years ago, however, does not differ much from the UK-born population.
- UK-born and foreign-born people have similar levels of occupation of social housing.
- Migrants and UK-born households living in privately rented homes in London spend more than a third of their net income on rent.
- An estimated 11 per cent of households headed by non-EU born adults live in overcrowded accommodation, rising to 18 per cent in London.
- Although there is conflicting evidence about the effect of migration on the housing market, the consensus appears to be that it does result in slight increases in house prices.

Homelessness is also particularly prevalent among migrants. About 15 per cent of those owed a prevention or relief duty by English local authorities are non-UK nationals, and prior to recent legislative changes around one-third of homelessness acceptances were of non-UK nationals. Of course, this misrepresents the full picture of migrant homelessness, since many of those in need may not seek help, or may not be entitled to local authority assistance beyond the 'advice' duty that applies regardless of immigration status.

The remainder of this chapter focuses on categories of migrants (often overlapping), who suffer particular hardship in their access to housing, often as a result of the government's self-proclaimed 'hostile environment' policies. They are:

- Migrants in the private rented sector.
- Migrants with 'no access to public funds'.
- Refugees.
- Asylum seekers.
- 'Irregular' or undocumented migrants.

The chapter ends with some brief conclusions.

Migrants in the private rented sector

New migrants often enter the private rented sector (PRS) through the least desirable accommodation, often in disadvantaged areas or where demand for housing is lowest, filling voids created by people who have moved on to better conditions. This has been described as the 'new migrant penalty' in the housing (and jobs) market.[6] A recent study in Manchester confirmed the precarity of the PRS for many migrants, especially those living in shared accommodation.[7]

Migrants experience unique barriers in accessing the PRS, not least because of unfamiliarity with the market and potentially greater difficulty in raising a deposit if they are recent arrivals or in low-paid work. A particular hurdle is the 'right to rent' test they have to pass to obtain a private letting (in England only). Because the process can be complicated, especially if the applicant does not have straightforward documentation, and because landlords face tough penalties if they knowingly give a tenancy to someone who is ineligible, many landlords are unwilling to let to non-British passport holders regardless of their residency status (42 per cent were found unwilling to do so in an extensive survey of landlords).[8]

Nevertheless, almost three-quarters of those who have come to the UK in the last five years live in the PRS. Evidence of the conditions many of them endure is provided in a study, by Generation Rent, of 150 migrants living in London and the South East (home to almost half of all migrants in the UK).[9] In accessing the sector, many had the same problems of unaffordable rents and tenancy deposits that apply to many aspiring tenants. But 42 per cent reported that they had struggled to find a landlord or letting agent to rent to them as a migrant, and 21 per cent reported difficulty in providing valid ID to landlords.

Many experienced poor housing conditions. For example, mould or damp were reported by 57 per cent of respondents (compared with just nine per cent of PRS tenancies recorded as having damp in the 2022 English Housing Survey). Of those that had reported their most recent incident of disrepair to their landlord or letting agent, 51 per cent stated that the repair issue had not been addressed. Poor relationships with a landlord were also reflected in 30 per cent having experienced a threat of eviction.

The Generation Rent report concludes that 'Every point of navigating the PRS, from the beginning of a new tenancy, during a tenancy, and after a tenancy ended, was fraught with challenges and difficulties for migrant private renters'.

Migrants with 'no recourse to public funds'

Many people assume that only undocumented migrants or asylum seekers have 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF), the government rule that denies access to services such as a housing allocation, homelessness assistance and almost all social security benefits.[10] In fact, the numbers are much larger: in 2022, about 2.6 million people held visas that have NRPF conditions, in addition to possibly hundreds of thousands of undocumented migrants with NRPF.[11] Among the unknown numbers are those EU citizens living in the UK who failed to gain settled status post-Brexit because they did not apply, or remain unaware of the requirements.

Although in theory it is possible to have the NRPF condition lifted, in practice only a few thousand annually manage to achieve this. This leaves huge numbers, often people in low-paid work, vulnerable to unemployment or ill-health without access to the full safety net of the welfare state. Nor are the effects temporary, because many have to wait ten years before they can obtain permanent settlement. Couples in which one is subject to NRPF are only entitled to the same benefits as single person households, which means there is an extra likelihood that their benefit will not cover their rent.

The housing-related effects were shown in a study by the Children's Society of 397 people with NRPF across England and Wales. It found that 60 per cent were behind on rent, compared to eight per cent for the UK population at large, and nearly half reported living in overcrowded conditions. Around one in five people with NRPF had experienced homelessness or insecure housing. Overall, many families were 'experiencing cycles of homelessness, sofa-surfing and sleeping on floors with other families, or in cramped accommodation; with spiralling debt and deep in poverty'.[12]

The government's argument for large-scale use of the NRPF condition is that migrants should be self-sustaining and not dependant on the state. However, most of those affected are working and paying taxes. If they become destitute, vulnerable people (e.g. those responsible for children) may get emergency help via local authority social services.[13] Lifting NRPF restrictions would save local authorities £405 million over ten years and cost central government £2.9 billion over the same period, according to one study. However, although there would be a net increase in public sector spending of £2.5 billion, a cost-benefit analysis shows that this might be offset by gains to individuals and the community of as much as £3.2 billion, in terms of outcomes such as better housing, education and health, etc., including savings to the NHS.[14]

Housing issues facing refugees

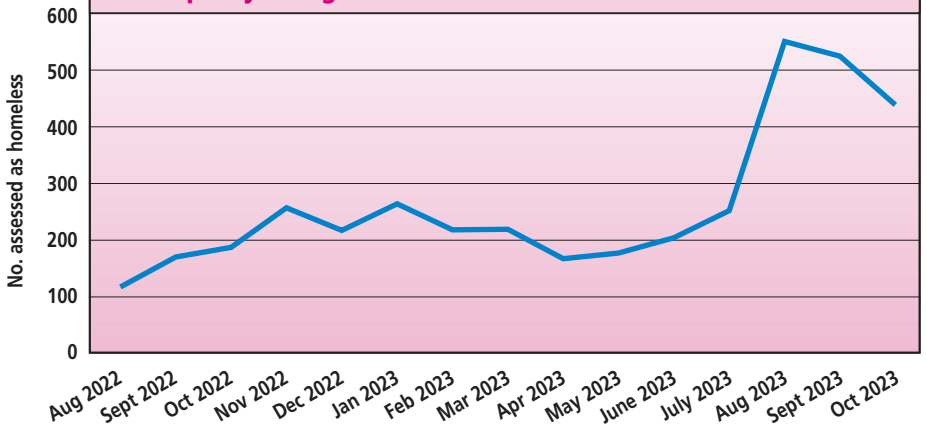
For the purposes of this chapter, 'refugees' are people brought formally to the UK with visas or via settlement schemes in response to international crises (such as those from Afghanistan or Ukraine), together with those who have successfully applied for asylum and have been granted some form of protection. All such refugees are entitled to housing assistance and social security benefits but, in part because of the numbers involved, their housing needs have exposed the enormous strains on the housing system and on homelessness services.

The numbers are significant. By the end of 2023, 195,000 visa-holders had arrived in total from Ukraine, 21,600 had arrived for resettlement from Afghanistan, and around 144,500 visa-holders had arrived from Hong Kong. These numbers are additional to arrivals from earlier resettlement schemes, for example for Syrian refugees. As to asylum seekers whose applications are successful, 38,761 people were granted refugee status or other protection in the year to September 2023. This was the highest number granted since 2002, a result of the recent attempt to clear the backlog of asylum claims (see below).

The accommodation arrangements for each of these groups are very different, as explained briefly here:

- *Ukrainians*. This is the most privileged group, with a tailor-made scheme, 'Homes for Ukraine', which placed 70 per cent of arrivals with UK 'hosts' who receive a monthly 'thank you' payment from government, while the remainder were hosted by family members in the UK. There has been some fall-out from both schemes, with 9,000 households dealt with as homeless by February 2024 because hosting arrangements had broken down or ended.
- *Afghan refugees*. Many Afghan evacuees are large families. While some quickly found normal tenancies or were housed by councils, most were placed in 'bridging accommodation', which in practice meant hotels. At the end of 2021 there were 12,000 Afghans in hotels; this had fallen to just over 8,000 by August 2023 when the Home Office began to evacuate the hotels, causing local authorities to report that many were presenting as homeless. In the two months when hotel use had ceased, 446 households were owed a 'prevention or relief duty' by English local authorities while, nationally, 1,826 were moved to 'interim accommodation', which in most cases was a different hotel. Thus, some families had lived in hotels for 18 months or longer, and perhaps been moved, severely affecting their ability to settle.
- *Hong Kong evacuees.* People arriving from Hong Kong are supported by various local schemes but in practice are expected to find their own accommodation in the PRS. Typically, they are people on reasonable incomes, but nevertheless have found difficulties such as not having a credit history, guarantor or UK track record of tenancies.

Figure 1.3.2 **Refugee homelessness increased sharply after Home Office policy change**



Source: FOI requests by the Big Issue to local authorities in areas with asylum accommodation.[17]
Note: Data are likely to be incomplete, but indicate the scale of the change that occurred in mid-year when the Home Office temporarily changed its practice of giving 28 days' notice to leave asylum support accommodation.

- *Refugees from other countries who were previously asylum seekers*. This is probably the most disadvantaged group, since many will have been living in asylum accommodation, receiving only small sums of money and unable to work, who then have to find a job and accommodation at short notice when their asylum application is approved. In theory they get 28 days' notice, but during 2023 the Home Office cut this to only a week, leading to a protest to ministers by the Refugee Council, CIH and other bodies.[15] The *Big Issue* collected data indicating that almost 1,500 refugees presented as homeless in three months to the end of October 2023 (Figure 1.3.2), but the true scale of the problem was probably much larger. Rough sleeping by refugees also increased sharply.[16] Then, just before Christmas 2023, the Home Office quietly reverted to the previous 28-day time period. However, the time period is still very short and pressures are exacerbated as a result of faster processing of asylum claims (see below).

The obvious conclusion from recent experience is that a housing system already under severe stress has found it difficult to meet the demands resulting from

international crises. This required novel solutions, which in the Home Office case was to resort to often-unsatisfactory hotels, while DLUHC developed and resourced an innovative hosting scheme for Ukrainians that – despite teething problems of various kinds – was able to respond to the immediate crisis. This has led some organisations to suggest that 'hosting' could become a permanent arrangement for accommodating other migrant groups such as recently approved refugees. Such schemes exist, run by charities, but on a small scale. So far there has been no interest from government in pursuing this, but the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee is currently investigating the longer-term implications of the Homes for Ukraine scheme.

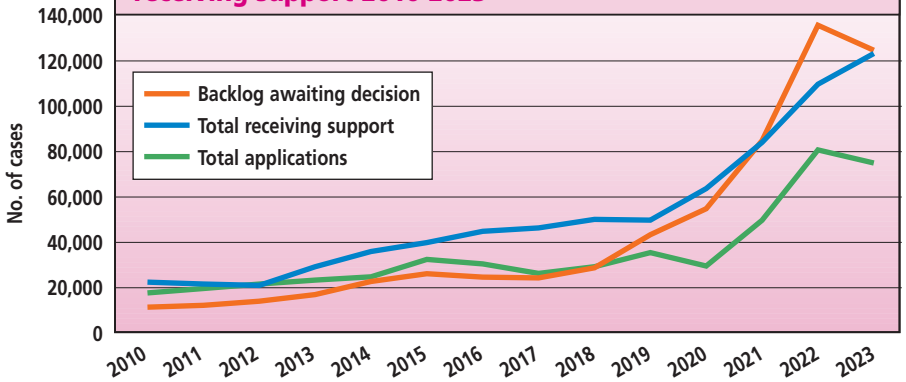
Accommodation issues for asylum seekers

If there has been plentiful media attention to questions about housing refugees, there has been even more about how asylum seekers are accommodated. They have no recourse to public funds, so in most cases their accommodation needs are met by the Home Office. This supported accommodation is 'dispersed' across the UK. Originally provided by local authorities, for the past decade it has been contracted out and currently there are three large suppliers, between them covering the whole UK.

When the current system started, typically there were around 20,000 asylum seekers receiving support, most in the form of accommodation. However, by 2018 the number had passed 50,000, and it then grew rapidly to 123,000 in September 2023. As Figure 1.3.3 shows, the numbers receiving support have grown in step with the backlog of undecided claims which has been building up over the last ten years; the number of new claims has grown too, but far less quickly. Asylum seekers typically wait for more than 20 months for an initial decision on their claims, one of the longest waits of any European country. The overall effect is of large numbers stuck in the asylum system unnecessarily and needing support, because otherwise they would be destitute.

In January 2024, the government claimed to have largely addressed the backlog of cases dating from before June 2022. However, there were still large numbers of more recent cases awaiting decisions, so that the overall backlog still stood (provisionally) at 98,599 cases.

Figure 1.3.3 **Asylum applications, backlog and numbers receiving support 2010-2023**



Source: Home Office Asylum and Resettlement – Summary tables September 2023.
Note: Data are for calendar years; data for 2023 are for the year to September.

The backlog has created a near-unmanageable accommodation problem, resolved initially by using hotels as 'contingency accommodation' instead of using normal housing acquired by providers from the PRS. Numbers accommodated in hotels grew from around 1,200 in March 2020 to 45,775 at the end of 2022 and to 56,042 by September 2023 (housing 45 per cent of all those receiving support). The cost (November 2023) was £8.2 million per day.[18]

A report by Migrant Voice cast light on the extremely poor conditions in some hotels.[19] Overcrowding and unsanitary conditions were rampant, with some occupants reporting that 24 people were sharing one toilet and another that one shower was shared by people from two floors of the hotel. In some cases, people were placed ten to a room, and one asylum seeker was left for a year in a windowless room measuring only two metres by two metres. People have also been moved between hotels at short notice, with no regard to their ability to 'make roots' in an area and begin to integrate.

Home Office plans to reduce the costs of asylum accommodation by finding cheaper alternatives to hotels have proved, if anything, even more problematic. One option is for contractors to lease more multi-occupied properties (HMOs) in

the PRS, but to make this more viable commercially the Home Office wants to suspend the licensing scheme that applies to HMOs in England and which enforces minimum standards, such as fire safety. This is being challenged in a legal action where this author is a witness, in part on the grounds that the proposal risks severely undermining a licensing system originally set up to protect tenants after a fire in Notting Hill in which eight people died.

The Home Office has explored and partially implemented even more radical options. It is using a remote ex-military base in Wethersfield, Essex, to house up to 1,700 asylum seekers. There have been several suicide attempts, violent incidents and, according to case studies of 140 occupants, a general deterioration in occupants' mental health.[20] Most controversial of all is the use of the Bibby Stockholm barge, moored at Portland in Dorset. Despite individual legal challenges the barge now accommodates 300 out of a planned 500 asylum seekers: there has been one suicide, and reports of poor and crowded conditions and general safety concerns. In total, there were an estimated 180 deaths in asylum accommodation in 2023, and there have been at least 23 suicides in the past four years.[21]

Not surprisingly, the government is accused of tolerating or even creating such conditions as a further intensification of its 'hostile environment', in this case aimed specifically at those who arrive by irregular means, such as 'small boats'. However, neither these conditions nor the even more alarming prospect of being deported to Rwanda has had much apparent effect on numbers: 29,437 arrived by 'small boat' in 2023, a similar level to 2021, although more than one-third down on the 45,755 arrivals in 2022.

Use of often expensive alternative accommodation such as hotels or barges reflects the general shortage of low-cost lettings in the PRS. For example, one of the objections to the removal of HMO licensing requirements is that this gives a price advantage to Home Office contractors compared with local authorities, which are competing for the same properties to provide temporary accommodation for homeless households, and whose costs have already escalated enormously (see Commentary Chapter 5). While clearing the asylum applications backlog would also ease the problem, it would add to the burden on local authorities, discussed earlier in this chapter.

The Home Office has made various efforts to increase the supply of dispersal accommodation using conventional housing. A target set in October 2022 to find an extra 500 dispersal bedspaces per week was intended to end hotel use by December 2023, but it was not achieved. Incentive payments to local authorities who accept dispersed asylum seekers in their areas have also been increased. However, the figures testify to a generalised, widespread shortage of low-cost accommodation in most parts of the UK, with competition for available properties, and for which the remedies being adopted are little more than sticking plasters.

'Irregular' or undocumented migrants – the most disadvantaged group

Of the migrant groups dealt with in this chapter, the one with the most precarious living conditions is the diverse group of those living in the UK without documented permission. It consists both of longstanding residents and new arrivals. For example, the people of the 'Windrush generation' who became victims of the ensuing scandal had, in most cases, lived in the UK for decades with full access to jobs, homes, health care and benefits. It was only the gradually tightening of the 'hostile environment' that made it difficult for them to prove their status and left many jobless, homeless and even destitute. On the other hand, irregular migrants may be new arrivals (perhaps on 'small boats') who disappear without seeking asylum, having been trafficked or who otherwise find illegal work. Between these extremes, the majority of people in this category have had visas or asylum claims which have expired or been denied, and thus no longer have any legal immigration status.

There have been several attempts to estimate the numbers of irregular migrants in the UK. However, what is an intrinsically difficult exercise has produced very varying results, from as low as 400,000 to as high as 1.3 million.[22]

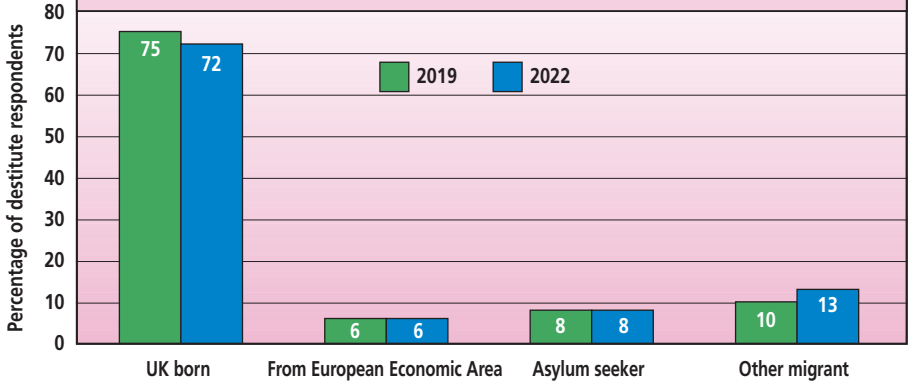
All irregular migrants have NRPF, meaning no recourse to most services and benefits (there are exceptions, such as – in theory – primary health care and a child's education). This means that their routes into accommodation depend on insecure arrangements such as sofa-surfing, having 'free' accommodation tied to illegal working (e.g. in farms or restaurants), using exploitative landlords who do not check their 'right to rent' or – of course – sleeping rough.

In 2022, more than a quarter (27 per cent) of destitute households were headed by someone who was not born in the UK (see Figure 1.3.4). The risk of destitution for migrants is 35 per cent higher than for non-migrants and a high proportion of these migrant households contain children.[23] Significant proportions are European nationals, often people who failed to apply for settled status in the UK or whose applications were rejected, and asylum seekers, usually those whose claims have been denied.

The obstacles to helping irregular migrants are considerable. Reports from CHAIN, a multi-agency database recording data about street homelessness in London, indicate that half of those sleeping rough in the metropolis are foreign nationals, typically with NRPF.[24] The London Borough of Camden, for example, recently found 40 per cent of people sleeping rough to be ineligible for benefits and therefore unable to be offered hostel accommodation or similar.[25]

Accommodation and support exists, but on a scale far smaller than the size of the problem. Because most irregular migrants cannot pay rent, the available support relies on hosting by individuals or in shared accommodation provided by bodies such as the Boaz Trust in Manchester or the Hope Project in Birmingham, which

Figure 1.3.4 **Migration profile of destitute people in the UK, 2019 and 2022**



Source: JRF, Destitution in the UK 2023.

manage houses offered free-of-charge by housing associations. Some associations, such as Soha Housing in Oxfordshire, provide free accommodation directly. NACCOM, the support network for bodies providing such options, has 130 member organisations across the UK.

For many migrants, the best route out of destitution is to regularise their status, which many can do if they have access to legal advice (such as through Street Legal, a scheme in London) and secure temporary accommodation from which they can make applications. However, schemes which offer such services at no cost are scarce and advisers have to be registered.[26]

Rather than supporting such approaches, the government is moving in the opposite direction. The Illegal Migration Act 2023 contains a range of measures to further deter undocumented migrants: increasing the use of detention and removal, banning those who have entered without leave after July 2023 from ever having legal status in the UK, and toughening the penalties applying to employers and landlords who employ or house irregular migrants. However, many commentators have pointed out that the Home Office has a poor track record of enforcement and of removing people from the country, thus the new legislation could be self-defeating and drive more people 'underground'. The result could be many more people 'stuck in limbo' in the UK, unable to claim asylum, unable to get mainstream work and unable to access housing or benefits.

Conclusion: A renewed focus on migrant integration is needed

One conclusion from this overview of migrant-related housing issues is the obvious one: that many of the problems reflect the broader shortage of affordable housing, and that migrants are without doubt one of the vulnerable groups most affected.

However, there is another important conclusion, which is that policies towards migrants have shifted markedly in the last two decades, from ones promoting inclusion to those focused on exclusion and denial of rights and benefits. There are several instances of this, such as the growth in categories of migrant subject to NRPF, and the commodification of asylum seekers' housing so that it is now

merely 'warehousing' them.[27] The Home Office used to have a 'refugee integration strategy' and projects to promote integration, including several run by housing organisations. When asylum seekers first began to be 'dispersed' in 2000, contracts were awarded to local authorities, who then used the income for local projects to benefit migrants and the communities where they settled. A 'Housing and Migration Network' existed, to promote ideas and exchange experiences.

All of this has disappeared as the focus has shifted towards (failed) attempts to reduce the headline immigration figures and (successful) attempts to demonise migrants. Labour has not yet made fully clear what its migration policies will be if it forms the next government, although it has committed to reversing some of the most extreme measures in the latest legislation. Its fulsome commitment to economic growth suggests that it might allow continued worker migration, to bolster the workforce. Given that, in general, public attitudes towards migration have softened, it would be opportune to shift the focus of policy away from the obsession with numbers and with maintaining a 'hostile environment', towards one which recognises the inevitability of migration and turns towards integrating migrants rather than demonising them.

Notes and references

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24 See https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/chain-reports

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26 Immigration advisers must be registered with the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC). For guidance on assisting migrants out of destitution, see www.housing-rights.info/advising-people-who-are-destitute.php

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