



# Research Update

## Attitudes to immigration in Northern Ireland

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### What's in a name?

Immigration to Northern Ireland reached a 15-year high in 2023. Of the 30,500 people arriving to live in Northern Ireland in the year ending mid-2023, 30 per cent came for work, 30 per cent came for family reasons, 18 per cent came to study, 13 per cent were seeking asylum and 9 per cent came for other reasons (NISRA, 2024a). Accordingly, there are many terms used to refer to people who move to Northern Ireland, such as 'refugee', 'asylum seeker', 'immigrant', or 'newcomer'. These are often loosely defined and open to misuse (see Devine et al., 2024) but they matter a great deal in terms of attitudes towards those living in Northern Ireland who were not born here.

The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey has measured public attitudes towards immigration and ethnic diversity in Northern Ireland every year since

2005. Initial analysis of findings of data from 2023 suggested that respondents were more inclusivist towards migrants than they had been in the past (Hayward and Rosher, 2024). This Research Update further explores NILT data, focussing on whether attitudes vary according to the specific immigrant group in question. If it seems to be so, then it underscores the importance of careful analysis and reporting of data on the topic of immigration. More interestingly, it also indicates that people are more sensitive to the terms used around the topic of immigration than tends to be assumed.

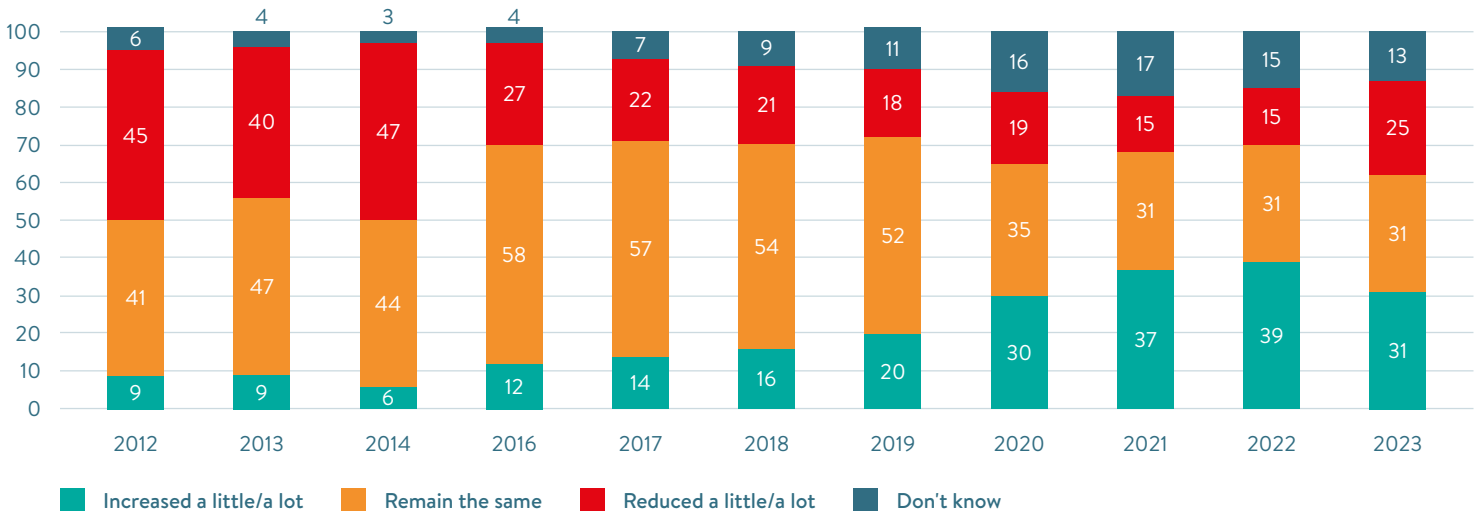
### Immigration levels

A simple marker of attitudes towards immigration is whether people think there should be more or less of it. In the 2023 NILT data, opinion was fairly evenly split. There was general support for increased levels in the number of

immigrants to Northern Ireland – 31 per cent thought it should be increased a lot or a little, with a similar proportion thinking that it should remain the same as it is. One quarter of respondents thought that the number of immigrants should be reduced. Views on this specific question have changed a lot in the decade since it was first asked (see Figure 1).

In 2012, nine per cent thought it should be increased and 45 per cent thought it should be reduced. There are interesting trends across this data. In 2012 and 2014, a greater proportion were in favour of reducing the level of immigration than keeping it the same. From 2016 to 2019, over half thought that numbers should be kept around the same level. There was a big change in 2020, when the proportion wanting numbers to increase started to rise, along with the proportion offering 'don't know' as a response.

Figure 1: Views on the number of immigrants to Northern Ireland (%)



It may be significant to think of the context for this change. The UK officially left the European Union (EU) in January 2020, and the Brexit debate was connected to that around migration. The Black Lives Matter movement gained much support worldwide, after the killing by police in Minneapolis of George Floyd in May 2020. Also notable is the fact that the methods for collecting NILT data changed in the COVID-19 pandemic conditions, with the 2020 questionnaire being completed remotely (online, or via a phone or video call), rather than face-to-face. NILT has used the Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (online) method since then. For whatever reason, people continue to be more willing to express support for increased levels of immigration than they were before 2020. Nevertheless, it is notable that the views in 2023 were, if anything, more exclusivist than they had been for a while. The proportion in 2023 wanting reduced levels of immigration (25%), for instance, was the highest it had been since 2016.

## Immigration in numbers

It is worth putting these trends in the context of the considerable changes in the numbers of immigrants in Northern Ireland over the course of these surveys. Mid-year population estimates indicate that between mid-2013 and mid-2023, Northern Ireland's population grew by 88,700 people to 1.92 million, averaging a 0.5 per cent increase each year (2020 being an outlier due to the pandemic) (NISRA, 2024b, p. 2). Data from the census of population undertaken on 21 March 2021 show that just under 14 per cent of the population (256,900 people) were born outside Northern Ireland. Of these, one third (33%, or 85,600 people) had arrived before 2001, one quarter (26%, 66,300 people) arrived between 2001 and 2010, and 41 per cent (105,000 people) arrived in the decade to 2021. Indeed, between 2011 and 2021, the number of arrivals steadily increased year by year, from 6,000 in 2011 to a peak of 15,700 in 2020 (NISRA, 2023a). What this tells us, most simply, is that as more people moved to Northern Ireland, respondents to NILT became less likely to want to see reduced levels of immigration.

A very large proportion of those arriving in Northern Ireland came from elsewhere in the United Kingdom (UK): 11,700 people compared to 18,800 from outside the UK in the year ending mid-2023 (NISRA, 2024b, p 5). The figures of those coming from outside the UK include migrant workers and asylum seekers, and those fleeing the war in Ukraine.

## Asylum seekers

An asylum seeker is someone who has applied for international protection and is awaiting a decision on whether they will be granted refugee status (Law Centre NI, 2024, p. 2). There are no official statistics on how many asylum seekers are in Northern Ireland. However, in December 2023, there were 2,831 people receiving asylum support. Such support is available to asylum seekers who are destitute on arrival, and comprises accommodation and a cash allowance paid on a pre-payment card. Not all people are eligible for such support, so the actual number of people seeking asylum in Northern Ireland is likely to be slightly higher than 2,831 (Law Centre NI, 2024, p. 2). Asylum seekers in Northern Ireland come from 66 countries, with the most common nationalities being Eritrean (420 people), Somali (403 people) and Syrian (352 people).

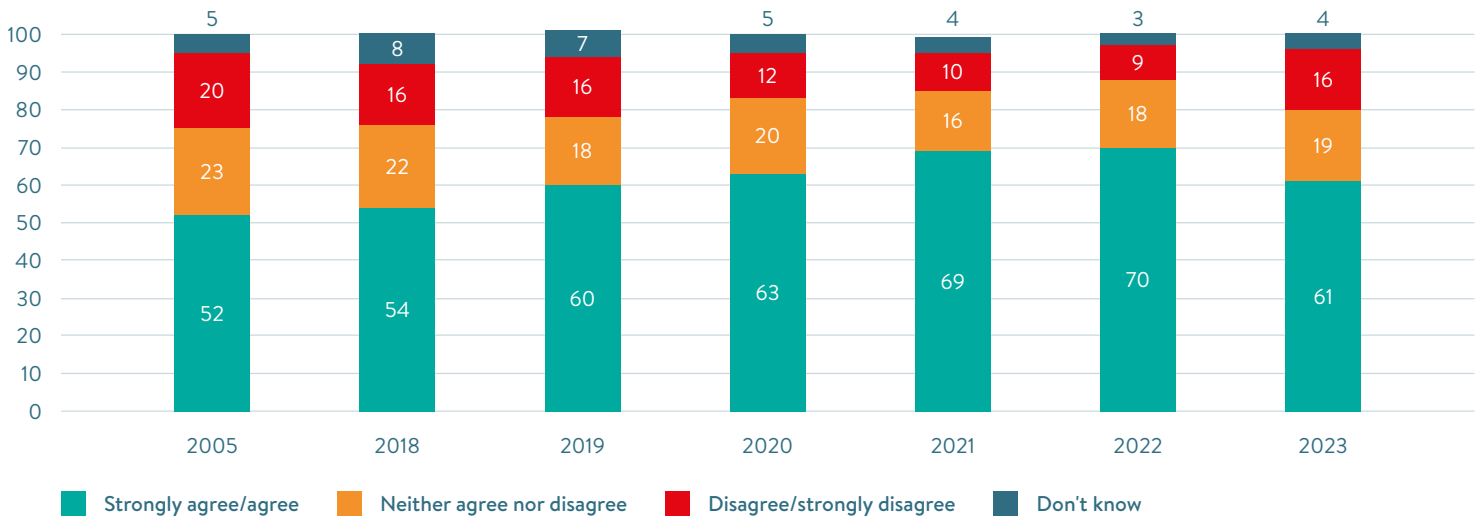
Since Brexit, the UK has drastically reduced the 'safe and legal' routes via which people can come to the UK for humanitarian reasons. Northern Ireland's experience of refugee resettlement (438 families) has primarily been with the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, which closed in 2021. The main remaining legal routes are for those meeting the criteria from just three countries: Afghanistan, Ukraine and Hong Kong.

There was one question in the 2023 survey specifically on asylum seekers that was previously asked in 2005, and then every year since 2018: How much do you agree or disagree that asylum seekers should be allowed to stay in Northern Ireland? In 2005, the description used to describe asylum seekers was people who come to Northern Ireland to get away from

persecution in their own country. When it was next asked, in 2018, this preamble was more fulsome: An asylum seeker is a person who says he or she is a refugee, someone fleeing harm and seeking the refuge and protection of a government but whose formal claim has not yet been considered by the authorities. In 2023, the definition was changed again to be more specific: An asylum seeker is someone seeking refugee status who has not yet received a decision from the Immigration Authorities on whether their application has been successful or not.

Looking at the results from the seven years in which this question was asked (albeit with those different definitions of 'asylum seeker'), we note the lack of dramatic change between 2005 and 2018 (Figure 2). 52 per cent agreed and 20 per cent disagreed in 2005; in 2018, 54 per cent agreed and 16 per cent disagreed. Support for allowing asylum seekers to stay in Northern Ireland rose from 2019 onwards, rising to 70 per cent in 2022. However, the 2023 results return to a pattern closer to that seen in 2019. To gauge whether this reflects a societal shift or the change in the definition used, we need to look at attitudes to other immigrant types.

**Figure 2: How much do you agree or disagree that asylum seekers should be allowed to stay in Northern Ireland? (%)**



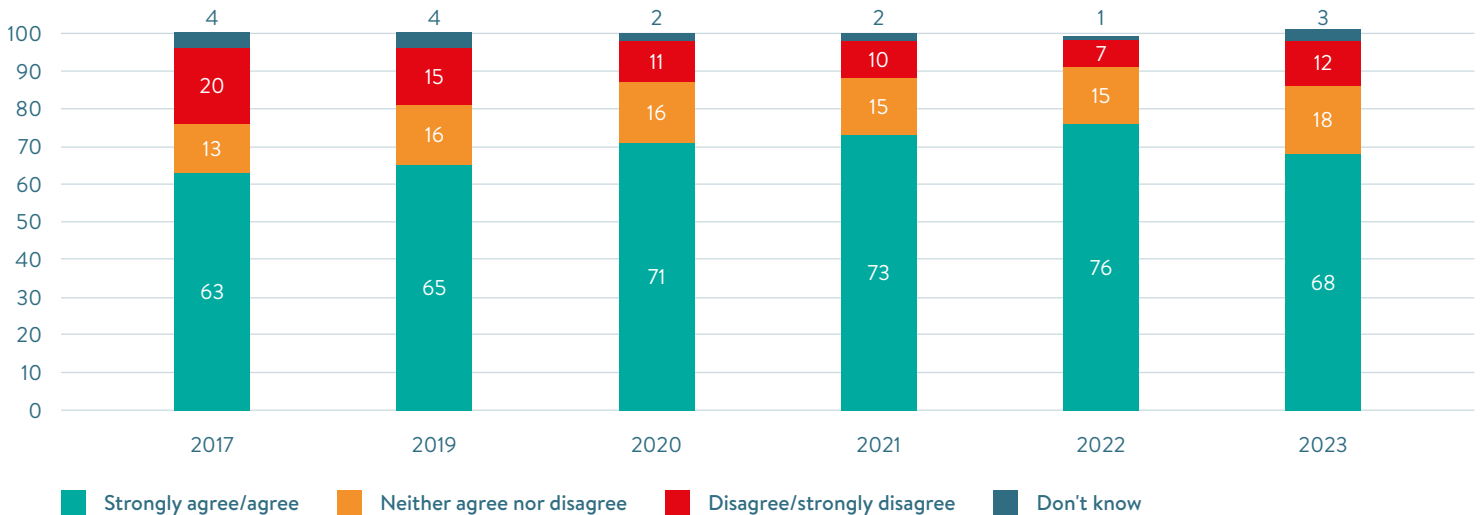
## Refugees

Between 2017 and 2023, respondents were asked whether or not they supported the statement: I think it is our duty to provide protection to refugees who are escaping persecution in their home country. The definition was consistent across all years: Refugees are people who have been given permission to stay in the

UK because they have been persecuted in their home country. Looking at the results, Figure 3 indicates two similar features to those identified in relation to the question on asylum seekers above (Figure 2). Firstly, respondents expressed more inclusive views from 2020 until 2022, and secondly, this pattern was

apparently reversed in 2023, when results mirrored those of 2019. It may be worth noting that net immigration to Northern Ireland increased from 2,300 in the year 2021/22 to 7,500 in the year 2022/23 (NISRA 2023b; NISRA 2024a).

**Figure 3: 'I think it is our duty to provide protection to refugees who are escaping persecution in their home country.' (%)**



## Migrant workers

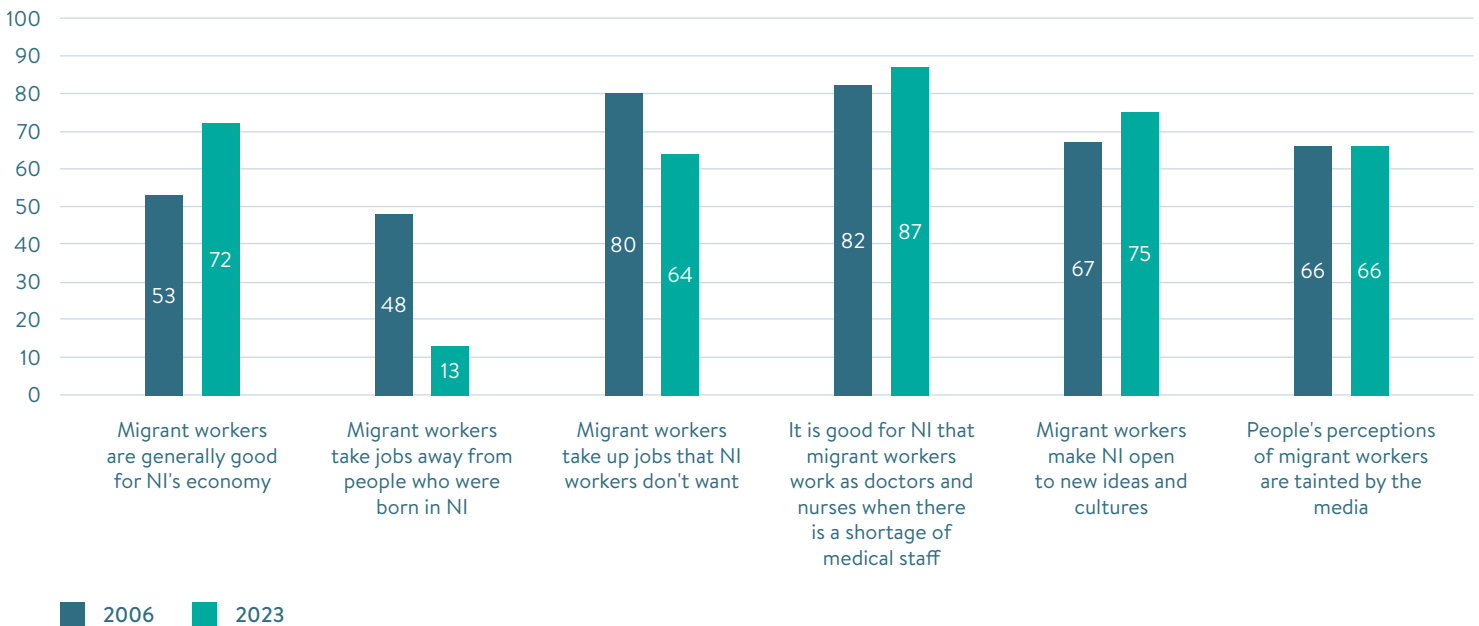
Most migration into Northern Ireland from outside the UK is for either work- or family-related reasons. In 2023, the questions on migrant workers were prefaced with the following definition: Migrants are people who come to live in Northern Ireland from other countries. They may come in order to work, study or to join family members. Questions on migrant workers were first asked in 2006, at which time, migrants were defined as

‘people who come from other countries to work in Northern Ireland, and may or may not stay very long here.’

It is notable from Figure 4 how opinions have become more positive over time. When the question was first asked in 2006, 53 per cent said migrant workers were good for the economy. By 2023, almost three-quarters of respondents (72%) thought this. In 2006, 48 per

cent said migrants take jobs from locals – the figure was 13 per cent in the 2023 survey. And in 2006, 67 per cent felt that migrant workers make Northern Ireland more open to new ideas and cultures – the latest figure was 75 per cent. Nevertheless, there has been a broader downturn in positive attitudes since 2022, reflecting the pattern seen in relation to other groups.

Figure 4: Views on migrant workers (2006 and 2023) (% strongly agree/agree)



## Conclusion

People migrate to Northern Ireland for many reasons, and live and work here with different circumstances and legal status. In order to provide a nuanced analysis of public opinion to immigration, this Research Update explored attitudes to different groups of people coming to live in Northern Ireland. It showed that, broadly speaking from the mid-2000s, as net immigration to Northern Ireland has increased, respondents to NILT became more supportive of the role of migrant workers in Northern Ireland, and less likely to want to see the level of immigration reduced. Indeed, there was

a particular rise in expressions of support for immigration after 2020. This came against a background of the UK's official exit from the European Union and the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, although it is too soon to detect a trend, another key finding is the drop in inclusivist attitudes between 2022 and 2023. It may be significant that this is in the context of increased net immigration, even though the numbers are relatively small. Such a change would be in line with wider economic and social events, within and beyond the UK. For example, the

‘Stop the Boats’ mantra that is common in British political discourse, the rise in hard right parties and policies across Europe, and the riots in Dublin in late 2023 that were apparently associated with white nationalist sentiment. Indeed, Belfast had its own experience of racist civil disturbance and attacks in 2024. We look forward with interest to the results of the NILT Survey of that year to see whether public opinion in Northern Ireland is indeed becoming more cold towards immigration, including migrant workers, asylum seekers and refugees.

## Key Points:

- Attitudes towards migrant workers have become more positive since 2006.
- In 2023, 72% of NILT respondents thought migrant workers are good for NI's economy and only 13% thought that migrant workers take jobs away from people born in Northern Ireland.
- In 2023, 31% of NILT respondents supported an increase in immigration.
- 61% felt that asylum seekers should be allowed to stay in Northern Ireland.
- 68% thought that it is our duty to provide protection to refugees escaping persecution.
- Between 2020 and 2022, attitudes towards immigration in Northern Ireland became more inclusivist. However, this was reversed in 2023.

## References

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The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2023, 1,200 people aged 18 years or over took part. The questions on immigration were funded by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister/The Executive Office.

NILT is a joint project of Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University, and provides an independent source of information on what the public thinks. For more information, visit the survey website at [www.ark.ac.uk/nilt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt)



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