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International Migration in Northern Ireland: an Update

NIAR 9-25

Around 293,000 long-term international migrants are estimated to have arrived in Northern Ireland between the years 2001 and 2023. This paper, which focuses on migration stocks and migration flows in and out of Northern Ireland, updates a previous paper (NIAR 56-17) and describes the key elements of this significant demographic change.

This information is provided to Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) and Assembly staff in support of their duties, and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. It should not be relied upon as professional legal advice, or as a substitute for it.

Key Points

- Since the Millennium, Northern Ireland has witnessed an unprecedented wave of international migration, initially from Central and Eastern Europe, but more recently from Africa and Asia. Between 2001 and 2023, over 293,000 long-term international migrants are estimated to have arrived in Northern Ireland, and 231,000 left, leaving a net total international migration flow of 62,000 people.
- Census 2021 showed that the total number of people belonging to a minority ethnic group stood at 65,600 people (3.4% of the population). Within this classification, the largest groups were Mixed Ethnicities (14,400), Black (11,000), Indian (9,900), Chinese (9,500), and Filipino (4,500) residents.
- The Census also revealed that 124,300 Northern Ireland residents were born outside the UK and Ireland, 71,200 in Europe and 53,100 in the rest of the world.
- While Northern Ireland (at 3.4%) has become a more diverse culture over the past two decades, it still remains the least diverse region of the UK, compared with England and Wales (18.3%) and Scotland (12.9%).
- As a consequence of international migration, the number of newcomer pupils (for whom English is a second language) has more than doubled in the past twelve years, from 8,674 in 2011 to 20,987 in 2023, and now accounts for 5.9 per cent of all school enrolments.
- Births to mothers born outside the UK and Ireland have risen from 589 in 2000 to 2,402 in 2022.
- During the period January 2010 – December 2020, Poland was the top country of origin for international migrants coming to live in Northern Ireland. Since Brexit, however, inward migration from Europe has fallen sharply, and medical card registrations (2023) show that India, Ireland and Nigeria are now the top countries of origin.
- Most migrants are young, with around 87 per cent under the age of 35 years. Just over half (51%) are male.

- Hate crime is more prevalent in Northern Ireland than generally realised, with the number of racist incidents and crimes regularly exceeding the number of sectarian crimes.
- Population projections suggest that international migration is likely to become the dominant factor in population change in Northern Ireland. This is because present trends show that, while birth rates continue to fall, death rates are rising sharply, and by 2035, the number of deaths is expected to exceed the number of births.
- With an ageing population, and a growing shortage of young people moving into the labour market, a regular flow of young, international migrants will be essential to maintain public services and the economy in general.

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1 Introduction

Since the Millennium, Northern Ireland has witnessed an unprecedented wave of international migration, initially from central and eastern Europe, but more recently from Africa and Asia. Between 2001 and 2023, over 291,000 long-term international migrants are estimated to have arrived in Northern Ireland. In the process, Northern Ireland has moved from a position of net migration loss to one of annual population gain.

In order to develop a picture of the true scale of migration over the past twenty-five years, it is necessary to examine ethnicity and migration from two perspectives, namely *stocks* and *flows*. ‘Stocks’ refer to the total number of international migrants in a country at a particular point in time, while ‘flow’ is the number of international migrants entering or leaving a country over the course of a specific period.

1.1 Estimating Long-term International Migration

Long-term International migration refers to the number of people leaving or arriving to live in Northern Ireland to and from areas outside the UK, for a period of at least twelve months. Net international migration is the difference between outflows from Northern Ireland and inflows to Northern Ireland. Migration estimates are calculated from mid-year to mid-year (e.g. the most recent migration estimates occurred between July 2022 and June 2023). There are no estimates for short-term / temporary migration.

2 Migration Stocks

In this section, migration stocks are examined through Census 2021 data (ethnicity and country of birth), the School Census (newcomer pupils), and birth statistics supplied by the Registrar General.

2.1 Ethnicity

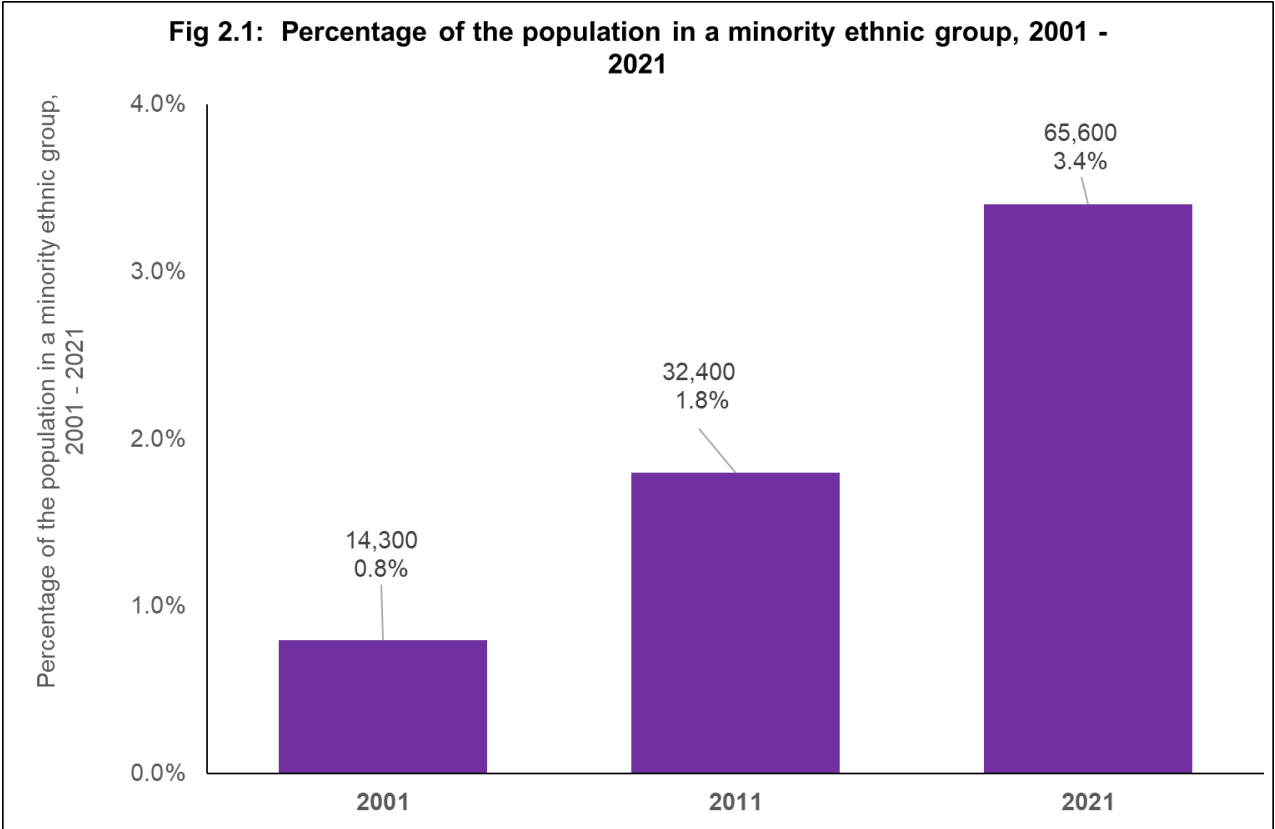
According to Census 2021 the total number of people in Northern Ireland belonging to a minority ethnic group stood at 65,600 people (3.4% of the population). Within this classification, the largest groups were Mixed Ethnicities (14,400), Black (11,000), Indian (9,900), Chinese (9,500), and Filipino (4,500). Irish Traveller, Arab, Pakistani and Roma ethnicities also each constituted 1,500 people or more.

Table 2.1 Ethnic group of usual residents, Census 2021

Ethnic Group	Count	Per cent (%)
White	1,837,600	96.6%
Minority Ethnic Group	65,600	3.4%
Black	11,000	0.6%
Indian	9,900	0.5%
Chinese	9,500	0.5%
Filipino	4,500	0.2%
Irish Traveller	2,600	0.1%
Arab	1,800	0.1%
Pakistani	1,600	0.1%
Roma	1,500	0.1%
Mixed Ethnicities	14,400	0.8%
Other Asian	5,200	0.3%
Other Ethnicities	3,600	0.2%
All usual residents	1,903,200	100.0%

Source: Table MS-B01, Census 2021

Fig 2.1 illustrates the growing diversity of the Northern Ireland population. Census 2001 recorded 14,300 people (0.8%) with a minority ethnic group classification. This figure more than doubled to 32,400 (1.8%) in Census 2011, and doubled again to 65,600 (3.4%) in 2021.



Source: NISRA (2022) Statistical Bulletin – Ethnic Group.

While Northern Ireland (3.4%) has become a more diverse culture over the past two decades, it still remains the least diverse region of the UK (Table 2.2), compared with England and Wales (18.3%) and Scotland (12.9%).

Table 2.2 Proportion (%) of population with minority ethnic background, UK Regions

UK Region	Per cent (%)
England and Wales	18.3%
Scotland	12.9%
Northern Ireland	3.4%

Source: ONS, Scotland's Census, NISRA, 2022

2.2 Country of Birth

Another way to view migration is through the ‘country of birth’ indicator in Census 2021. While Northern Ireland as a whole has become more diverse in recent years, the inflow of new residents from countries outside the UK and Ireland has not been uniform

across all areas of the Province. An example of where international migration has been considerably higher than average is the Botanic area of South Belfast (see Map 2.1 overleaf).

Table 2.3 shows a comparison between Northern Ireland as a whole, and the Botanic District Electoral Area ¹ (DEA). While 6.3 per cent of the Northern Ireland population were born outside the UK and Ireland, this figure rises to almost a quarter (23.4%) in Botanic DEA.

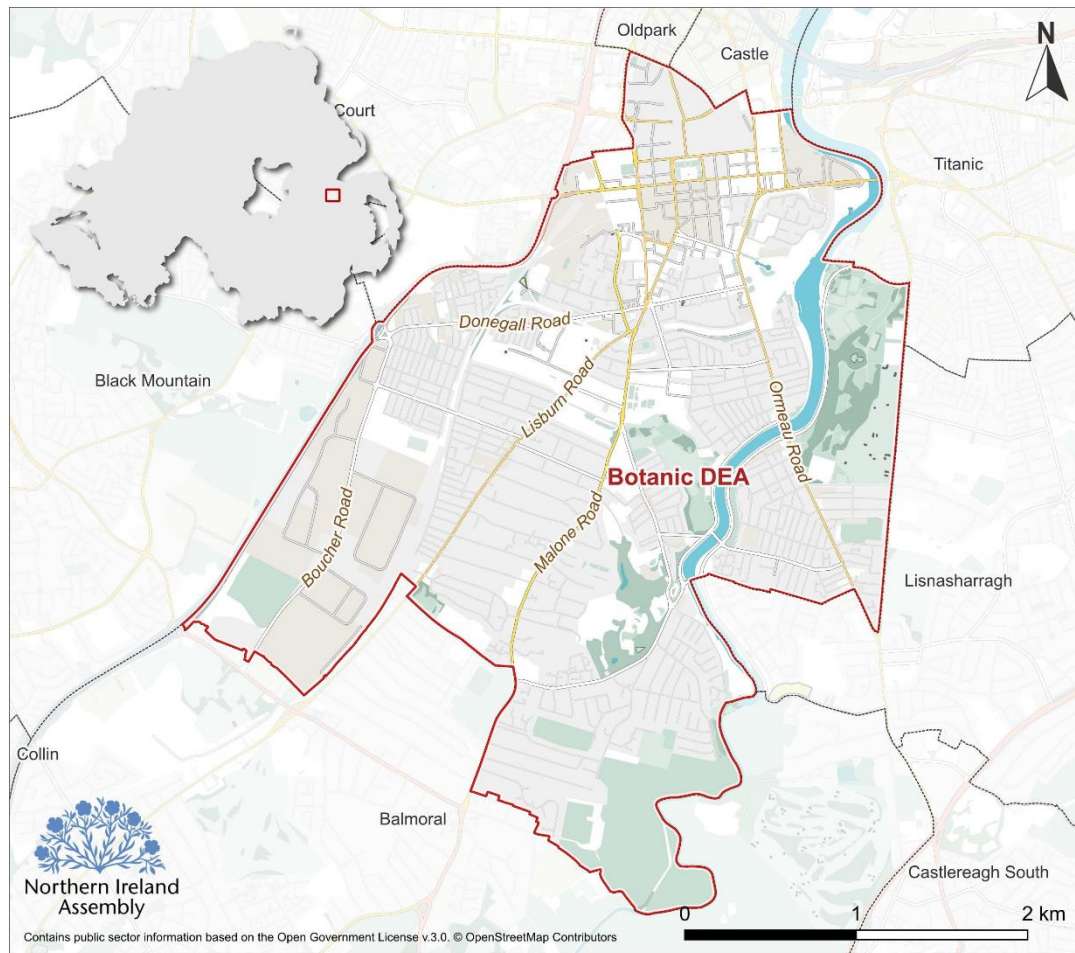
Table 2.3 Country of Birth, Northern Ireland – v – Botanic DEA, Census 2021

Country of Birth	Northern Ireland		Botanic DEA	
	Count	%	Count	%
Northern Ireland	1,646,300	86.5%	32,672	65.7%
England, Scotland and Wales	92,300	4.8%	3,709	7.55%
Ireland	40,400	2.1%	1,738	3.5%
Europe	71,200	3.5%	3,416	6.9%
Rest of World	53,100	2.8%	8,192	16.5%
Total	1,646,300	100.0%	49,727	100.0%

Source: NISRA (2023) Flexible Table Builder, Country of Birth

¹ **Botanic** is one of the ten district electoral areas (DEA) in Belfast. The district contains the wards of Blackstaff, Central, Ormeau, Stranmillis, and Windsor. Botanic, along with neighbouring Balmoral, forms the greater part of the Belfast South and Mid Down constituency. It covers large parts of the centre and southern parts of the city.

It was chosen as an example because it has the second-highest proportion of residents born outside the UK and Ireland (23.4%), second only to Dungannon DEA (26.2%). It was also the site of most of the racially-motivated violence of August 2024, e.g. Donegal road, Shaftesbury Square, Botanic Avenue, University Avenue, Ormeau Road.

Map 2.1 Botanic DEA

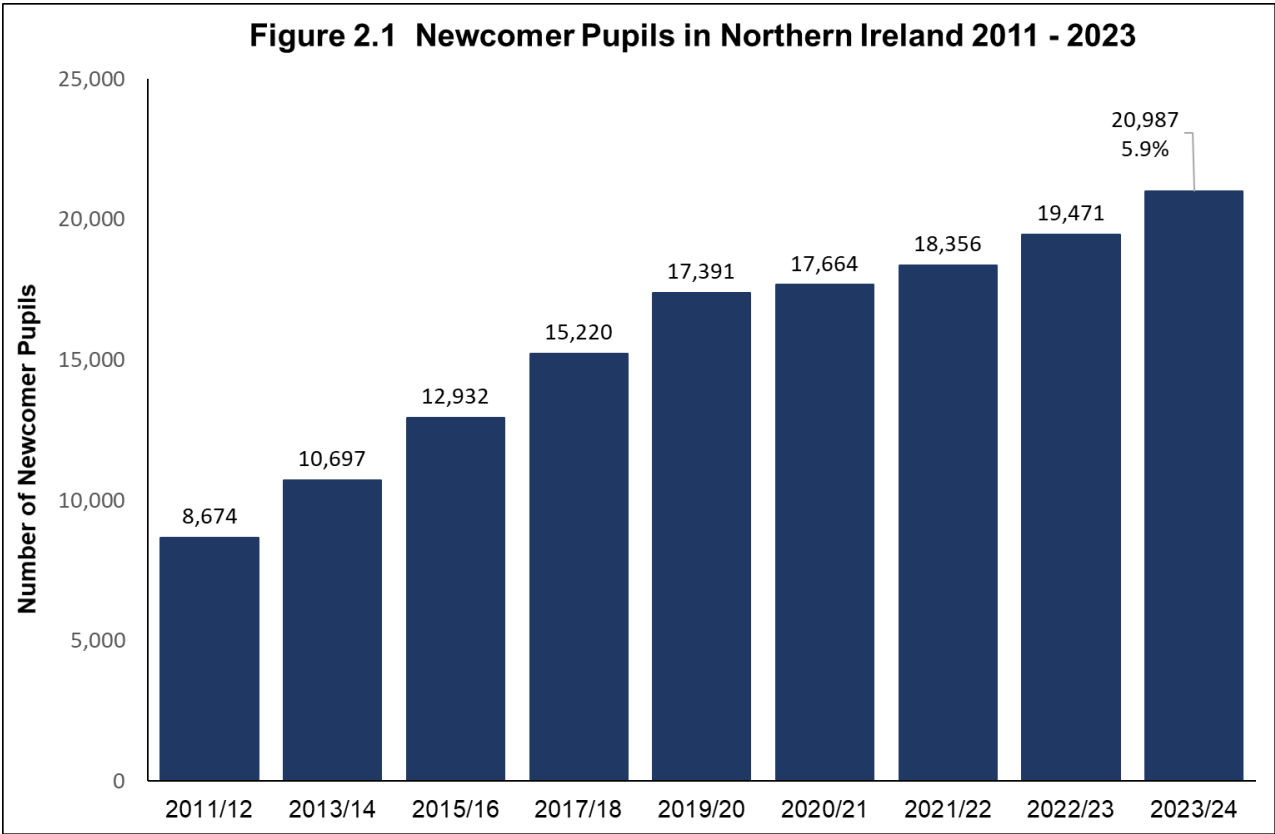
2.3 Newcomer Pupils

Schools in Northern Ireland are becoming increasingly ethnically diverse, which is reflected in the number of 'newcomer' pupils. A newcomer pupil is one who has enrolled in a school but who does not have the satisfactory language skills to participate fully in the school curriculum, and does not have a language in common with the teacher, whether that is English or Irish ². This category, which has previously been referred to as English as an Additional Language, is primarily composed of children from a minority ethnic background.

² Department of Education (2024) Annual Enrolments at schools and in funded pre-school education in Northern Ireland 2023- 24. July 2024, available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Revised%20-%20Annual%20enrolments%20at%20schools%20and%20in%20funded%20pre-school%20education%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%20-%202023-24.pdf>

Figure 2.1 (below) illustrates trends in the number of newcomer pupils enrolled in Northern Ireland schools (all types) during the period starting October 2011 until October 2022. The chart reveals that the number of newcomer pupils has more than doubled in the past twelve years, from 8,674 in 2011 to 20,987 in 2023, and now accounts for 5.9 per cent of all school enrolments.

In some schools the proportion of newcomer pupils is much higher than the average figure, including 70 primary schools where the percentage is 20 per cent or more ³. Table 2.4 (overleaf) lists the ten primary schools with the largest proportion of newcomer pupils. The list includes schools in Belfast, Ballymena, Dungannon, Portadown and Armagh.



Source: Department of Education (2024) Statistical Release: “Annual enrolments at schools and in funded pre-school education in Northern Ireland, 2023-24.” published 24, February 2024.

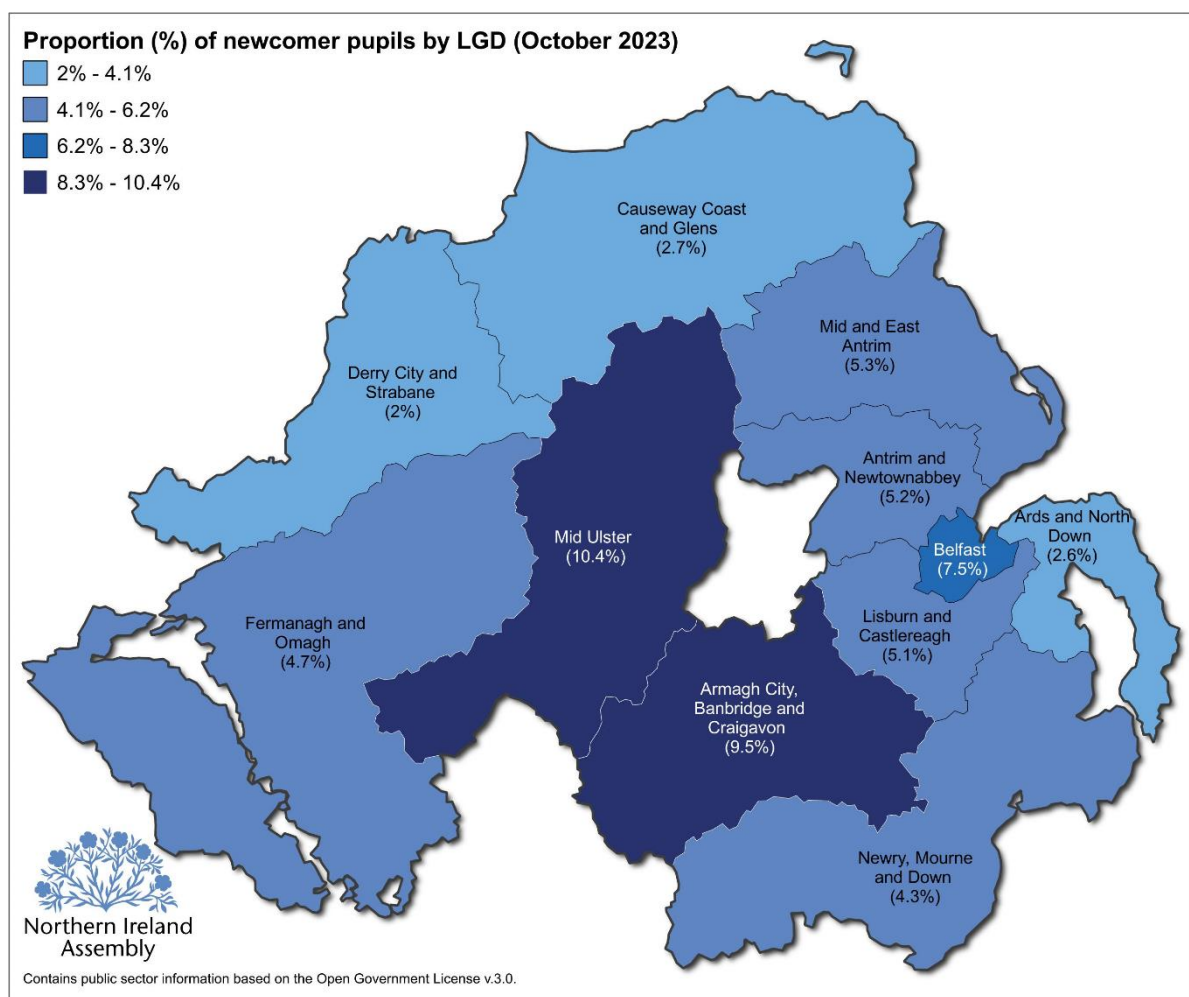
³ Department of Education (2024) School level Primary school data, 2023 – 24. Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enrolment-school-level-data-202324>

Table 2.4: Primary Schools with highest proportion of Newcomer Pupils, Oct 2023

Primary School	No. of Newcomer Pupils	Per cent (%) Newcomers	Total school Population
Presentation P.S., Portadown	270	90.3%	299
St Patrick's P.S., Dungannon	773	87.0%	888
Fane Street Primary School, Belfast	263	85.1%	309
Dungannon Primary School	234	73.1%	320
Botanic Primary School, Belfast	146	69.5%	210
St Mary's Primary School, Belfast	88	66.7%	132
Mount St Catherine's P.S., Armagh	94	62.3%	151
Harryville Primary School, Ballymena	126	55.3%	228
Ballymena Primary School	133	54.5%	244
Holy Rosary Primary School, Belfast	250	53.2%	470

Source: Department of Education (2024) School level – primary schools – data 2023/24

Map 2.2 (overleaf) illustrates the distribution of newcomer pupils across the eleven local government districts (LGDs) in October 2023. With 3,469 newcomers, Mid Ulster (10.4% of all school enrolments) had the largest proportion, followed by Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon (9.5%). In Belfast, there were 5,275 newcomers, representing 7.5% of all enrolments. Ards and North Down (2.6%) and Derry City and Strabane (2.0%) had the smallest proportion of such pupils.

Map 2.2 Proportion of newcomer pupils by LGD (October 2023)

Source: Statistics and Research Team, Department of Education, November 2024

2.3 Birth statistics

Birth statistics clearly show the impact of migration. Table 2.5 (overleaf) presents statistics on births in Northern Ireland by country of birth of the mother for the full period, 2000 – 2022⁴. It shows a significant increase in the number of births to mothers born outside the UK and Ireland since the Millennium. In the year 2000, 589 births to mothers born in the rest of the world were recorded, representing 3.1 per cent of all births that year. By 2010, this figure had risen to 2,473 (10.8%) and, apart from the pandemic years (2020 – 21) has remained at this level ever since.

⁴ NISRA (2023) Births 2022 Tables. Available at: https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/Section%203%20-%20Births_Tables_2022_Revised_Final.xlsx

Table 2.5 Births in Northern Ireland by Country of Birth of Mother, 2000 – 2022

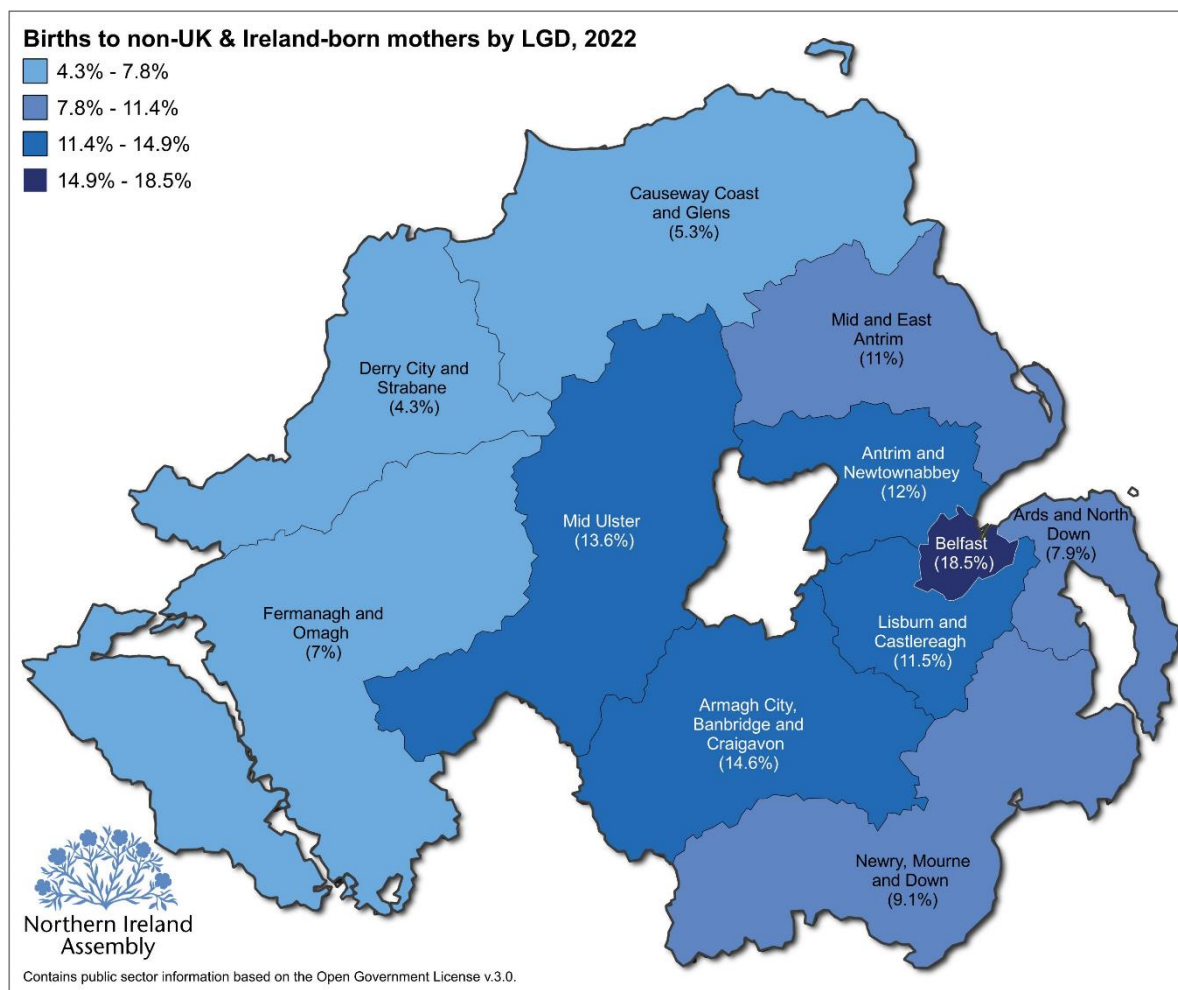
Registration Year	All Births	NI + GB + Ireland	Rest of World	Not Stated	Rest of World (%)
2000	21,512	20,891	589	32	3.1%
2001	21,962	21,272	661	29	3.5%
2002	21,385	20,640	724	21	3.9%
2003	21,648	20,723	896	29	4.8%
2004	22,318	21,153	1,130	35	5.9%
2005	22,328	21,208	1,104	16	5.7%
2006	23,272	21,824	1,448	-	7.1%
2007	24,451	22,504	1,945	2	8.9%
2008	25,631	23,284	2,347	-	10.2%
2009	24,910	22,592	2,318	-	10.3%
2010	25,315	22,842	2,473	-	10.8%
2011	25,273	22,796	2,477	-	10.9%
2012	25,269	22,810	2,459	-	10.8%
2013	24,277	21,834	2,443	-	11.1%
2014	24,394	21,925	2,469	-	11.2%
2015	24,215	21,789	2,426	-	10.0%
2016	24,076	21,552	2,524	-	10.5%
2017	23,075	20,654	2,421	-	10.5%
2018	22,829	20,397	2,432	-	10.7%
2019	22,445	20,045	2,400	-	10.7%
2020	20,825	18,684	2,141	-	10.3%
2021	22,071	19,787	2,284	-	10.3%
2022	20,837	18,435	2,402	-	11.5%

Source: Registrar General Annual Report tables 2022

Table 2.5 reveals that over one in 10 (11.5%) of all registered births in Northern Ireland during 2022 were to mothers born outside the UK and Ireland. This figure, however, masks considerable local variability in the figures. Map 2.3 (overleaf) shows that the proportion of births to non-UK and Ireland mothers ranges from 4.3 per cent in Derry

and Strabane LGD to 18.5 per cent, or almost one in five in Belfast. Other council areas with a high proportion of such births include Mid-Ulster (13.6%) and Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon (14.6%).

Map 2.3 Births to mothers born outside the UK and Ireland, 2022



Source: NISRA (2024) DMB.

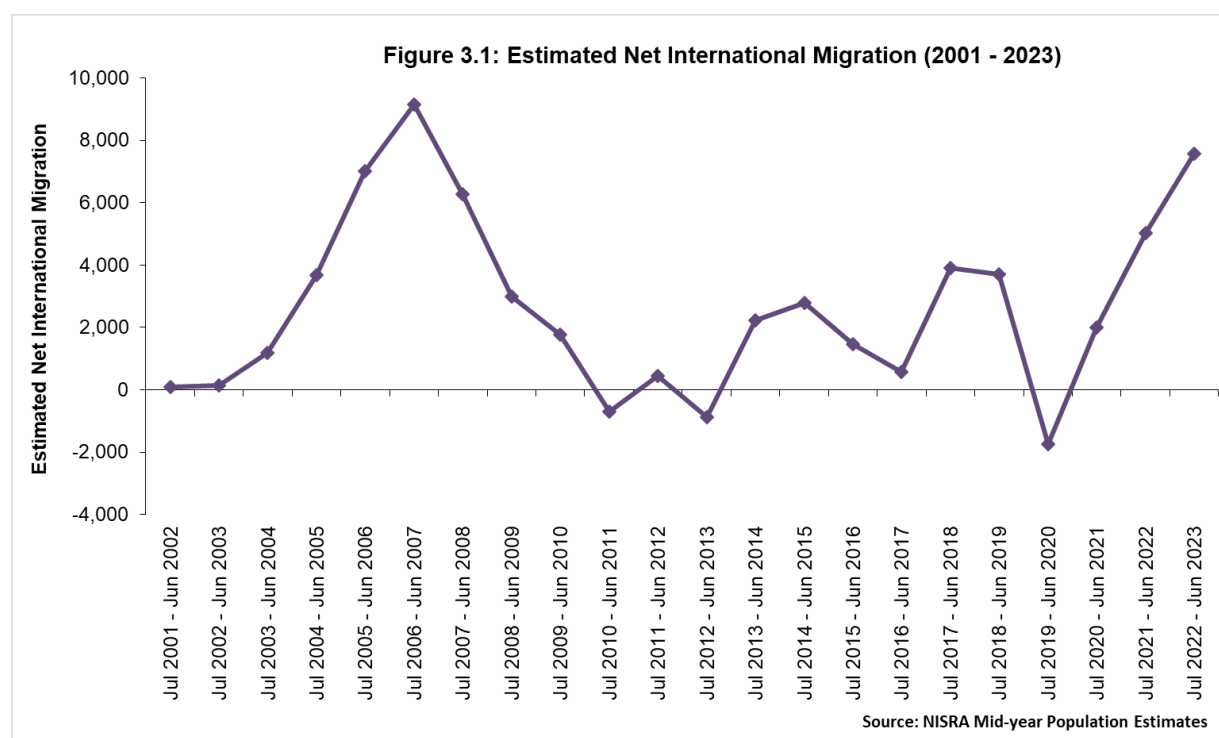
This section of the paper has presented data on **migration stocks** – namely, the total number of international migrants in Northern Ireland at a particular point in time. The next section will examine **migration flows**, i.e. the number of international migrants entering or leaving Northern Ireland over the course of a specified period.

3 Migration Flows

Migration is the most difficult component of population change to measure, as unlike births and deaths, there is no complete system for registering migration. In Northern Ireland, migration is estimated using Medical Card registrations and de-registrations supplied by the Business Service Organisation (BSO). It is recognised that the medical card method is deficient in recording young adult males, as well as the significant proportion of migrants who return to their country of origin without de-registering. The data is therefore upscaled and weighted to take account of these factors. NISRA is content that their methods yield robust and accurate estimates.

3.1 Net International Migration, an Overview

Fig 3.1 and Table 3.1 (overleaf) present estimates for net international migration flows during the period 2000 – 2023. An estimated 293,000 migrants arrived in Northern Ireland over that period, and 231,000 left, leaving a net total international migration flow of 62,000 people.



On 1 May 2004, eight central and eastern European countries (the “A8”) joined the EU. Twelve of the EU-15 Member States imposed labour market restrictions on A8

Table 3.1 Estimated Net International Migration, 2001 – 2023 ⁵

Time-period	Estimated International Inflows	Estimated International Outflows	Net International Migration
Jul 2001 – Jun 2002	6,488	6,393	95
Jul 2002 – Jun 2003	6,810	6,683	127
Jul 2003 – Jun 2004	8,174	6,996	1,178
Jul 2004 – Jun 2005	12,544	8,861	3,683
Jul 2005 – Jun 2006	15,803	8,797	7,006
Jul 2006 – Jun 2007	19,773	10,633	9,140
Jul 2007 – Jun 2008	18,261	11,981	6,280
Jul 2008 – Jun 2009	14,404	11,406	2,998
Jul 2009 – Jun 2010	13,877	12,115	1,762
Jul 2010 – Jun 2011	13,401	14,097	-696
Jul 2011 – Jun 2012	12,922	11,694	1,228
Jul 2012 – Jun 2013	12,736	12,921	-185
Jul 2013 – Jun 2014	13,300	10,542	2,758
Jul 2014 – Jun 2015	13,093	9,782	3,311
Jul 2015 – Jun 2016	12,998	11,115	1,883
Jul 2016 – Jun 2017	11,310	10,469	841
Jul 2017 – Jun 2018	13,100	9,078	4,022
Jul 2018 – Jun 2019	14,191	10,392	3,799
Jul 2019 – Jun 2020	11,181	13,003	-1,822
Jul 2020 – Jun 2021	13,296	11,308	1,988
Jul 2021 – Jun 2022	16,922	11,902	5,020
Jul 2022 – Jun 2023	18,797	11,235	7,562
Total	293,381	231,403	61,978

Source: NISRA (2024) Source: NISRA (2024) Components of change.

⁵ Source: NISRA (2024) Mid-year Estimates 2023, Components of change, September 2024 Available at: <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/MYE23-CoC.xlsx>

nationals, the exceptions being the UK, Ireland and Sweden. With comparatively free access to the labour market, citizens from the A8 countries began to arrive in the UK and Ireland in increasing numbers.

International migration flows peaked in 2006-07, when a total of 19,800 people came to live in Northern Ireland from outside the UK, while 10,600 left to live abroad, leaving a net inflow of approximately 9,200 people. With the onset of the global financial crisis in 2008, migration flows began to decline and level off. After a net loss of international migrants in 2010-11 and 2012-13, when more people left Northern Ireland than came to live here, net international migration moved into positive territory again in 2013-14, with an increase of 2,200 people. Migration remained positive until 2019, when a net figure of 3,700 was reported. The following year however (year ending June 2020), which coincided with Brexit and the beginning of the pandemic, saw an overall exodus of c. 1,800 people from Northern Ireland. Migration again moved into positive territory the following year (2021) and a net figure of 7,500 was recorded for the year ending June 2023.

In summary, apart from the years ending mid-2011, mid-2013, and mid-2020, international migration to Northern Ireland has been in positive territory since 2004.

3.2 International Migration: Countries of Origin

During the period January 2010 – December 2020, Poland was the top country of origin for international migrants coming to live in Northern Ireland. This is confirmed by [medical card registrations](#)⁶ (Table 3.3), which show that Poland topped the list with 16,086 registrations, followed by Ireland (15,935) and Romania (9,244).

Since Brexit, however, inward migration from Europe has fallen sharply, and the [latest figures](#) (2023) show that India, Ireland and Nigeria are now the top three countries of origin for new medical card registrations from outside the UK.

⁶ The Medical Card Register is maintained by the Business Services Organisation (BSO) and is a list of patients registered with a family doctor.

Table 3.3 International Inflows to Northern Ireland, Jan 2010 – Dec 2020

Nationality	Count
Poland	16,086
Ireland	15,935
Romania	9,244
Lithuania	8,672
China	5,365
India	5,338
Bulgaria	5,056
Portugal	4,242
U.S.A.	3,663
Slovakia	3,030
Other	48,548
Total	125,178

Source: BSO, Medical Card Registrations

3.2 International Migration by Age and Sex

Table 3.4 shows net international migration to Northern Ireland by age band for the full period, 2001 – 2023. The data reveals that most migrants are young, with an estimated total of 86.8 per cent under the age of 35 years.

Table 3.4 Estimated Net International Migration by Age band, 2001 - 2023

Age Band	Per cent (%)
0 – 17 years	33.7
18 - 24 years	28.3
25 – 34 years	24.8
35 – 44 years	8.9
45 – 54 years	6.6
55 – 64 years	1.3
65 + years	-3.6

Source: NISRA (2024) Mid-year Population Estimates: Migration flows by type, age and sex, 2001-2023

International migration is also balanced in terms of sex: during the period 2001 – 2023, females accounted for almost 49 per cent of international migrants and males 51 per cent (Table 3.5).

Table 3.5 Estimated Net International Migration by Sex, 2001 - 2023

Age Band	Sex	Per cent (%)
Female	30,310	48.9
Male	31,668	51.1
Total	61,978	100.0

Source: NISRA (2024) Mid-year Population Estimates: Migration flows by type, age and sex, 2001-2023

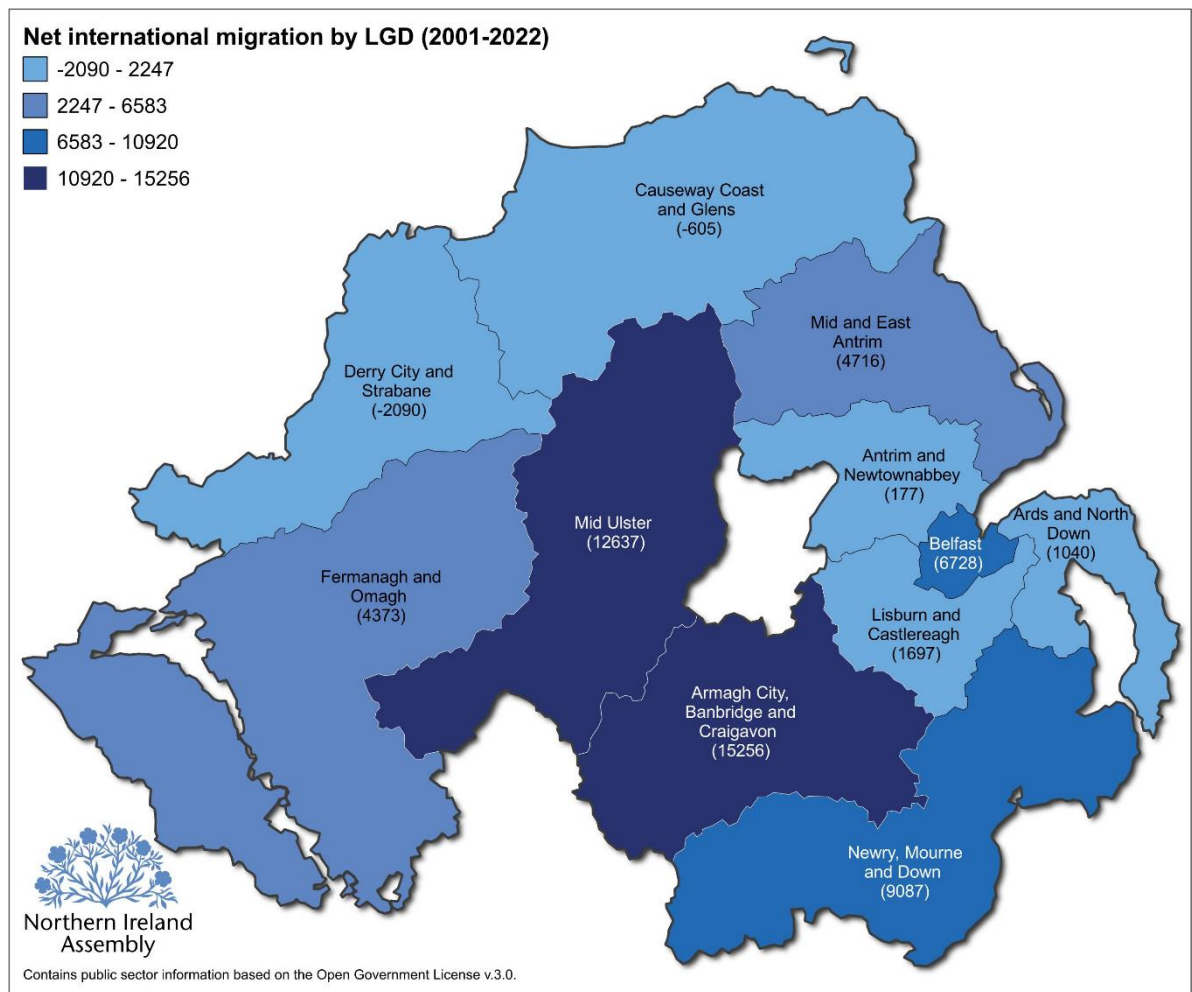
3.3 International Migration by Local Government District (LGD)

International in-migration has not been uniform across all LGDs. For example, during 2001 – 2022, three LGDs (Derry City and Strabane, Causeway Coast, and Antrim and Newtownabbey) actually experienced a net loss of migrants (Table 3.6), while the other eight district councils saw a net gain.

Table 3.6 Net International Migration by LGD, 2001 – 2022

LGD	Net International Migration
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon	16,022
Mid Ulster	13,461
Newry, Mourne and Down	9,814
Belfast	6,169
Mid and East Antrim	4,900
Fermanagh and Omagh	4,661
Lisburn and Castlereagh	2,224
Ards and North Down	1,055
Antrim and Newtownabbey	-75
Causeway Coast and Glens	-1,226
Derry City and Strabane	-2,589

Source: NISRA (2024)

Map 3.1 Net International Migration by LGD (2001 – 2022)

Source: NISRA (2024) [Components of Change \(all areas\) 2023](#)

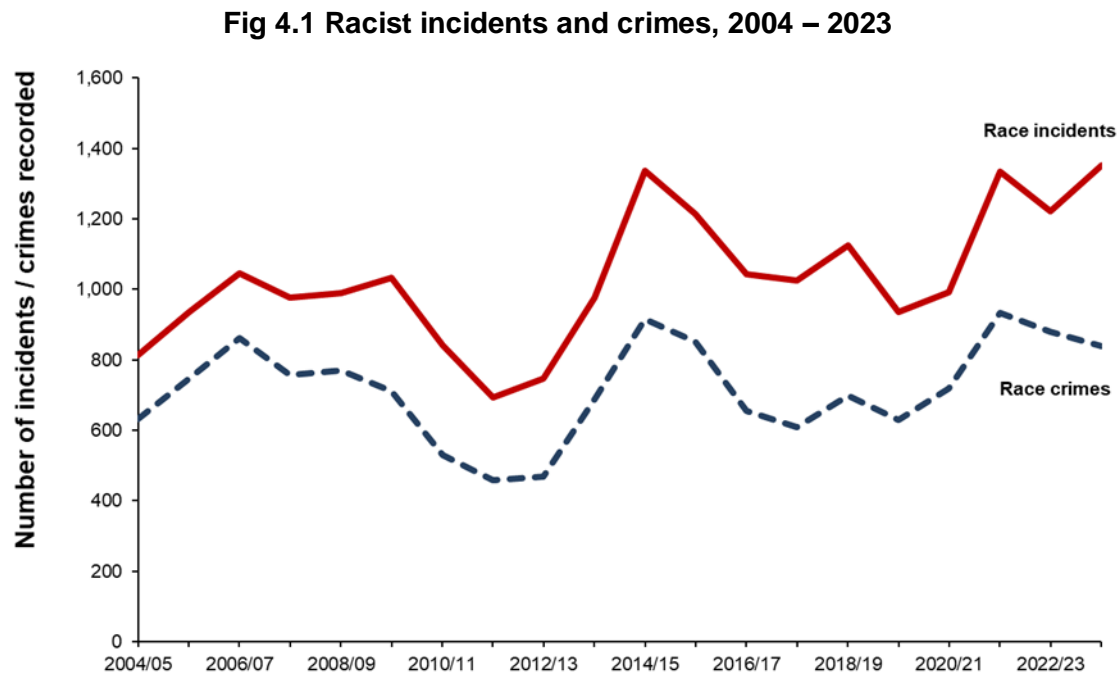
The distribution of international migration across the eleven council areas is illustrated in Map 3.1 (above). The map shows that over the full period (2001-22), Mid Ulster, Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon, and Newry, Mourne and Down LGDs had the largest number of international migrants.

The growing diversity of the population is not supported by everyone in the community. The next section examines hate crime in Northern Ireland since 2004.

4 Hate Crime in Northern Ireland

Hate crime refers to incidents or notifiable offences with a perceived racist, homophobic or sectarian motive. A **racist incident** is defined as any incident, which may or may not constitute a criminal offence, which is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person. A **racist crime** is a notifiable offence (such as assault) which is perceived by the victim, or any other person, as being motivated by racial prejudice or hate ⁷.

Figure 4.1 and Table 4.1 (overleaf) illustrate trends in racist incidents and crimes for the period 2004 – 2024. The figure shows that the number of racist incidents / crimes fluctuated during this period with a number of peaks and troughs, ranging from a low of 813 incidents in 2004 to a current peak of 1,353 in the year ending 30 June 2024.



Source: PSNI (2024)

⁷ PSNI (2018) User Guide to Police Recorded Statistics in Northern Ireland, January 2018. Available at: <https://www.psnipolice.uk/globalassets/inside-the-psni/our-statistics/police-recorded-crime-statistics/documents/crime-user-guide.pdf>

Table 4.1 Racist Incidents and Offences, 2004 – 2024

	Racist incidents	Racist crimes
2004/05	813	633
2005/06	936	746
2006/07	1,047	861
2007/08	976	757
2008/09	990	771
2009/10	1,034	711
2010/11	842	531
2011/12	694	458
2012/13	748	470
2013/14	976	688
2014/15	1,336	916
2015/16	1,215	851
2016/17	1,044	654
2017/18	1,025	609
2018/19	1,124	699
2019/20	936	626
2020/21	993	719
2021/22	1,335	933
2022/23	1,221	880
2023/24	1,353	839

Source: PSNI (2024)

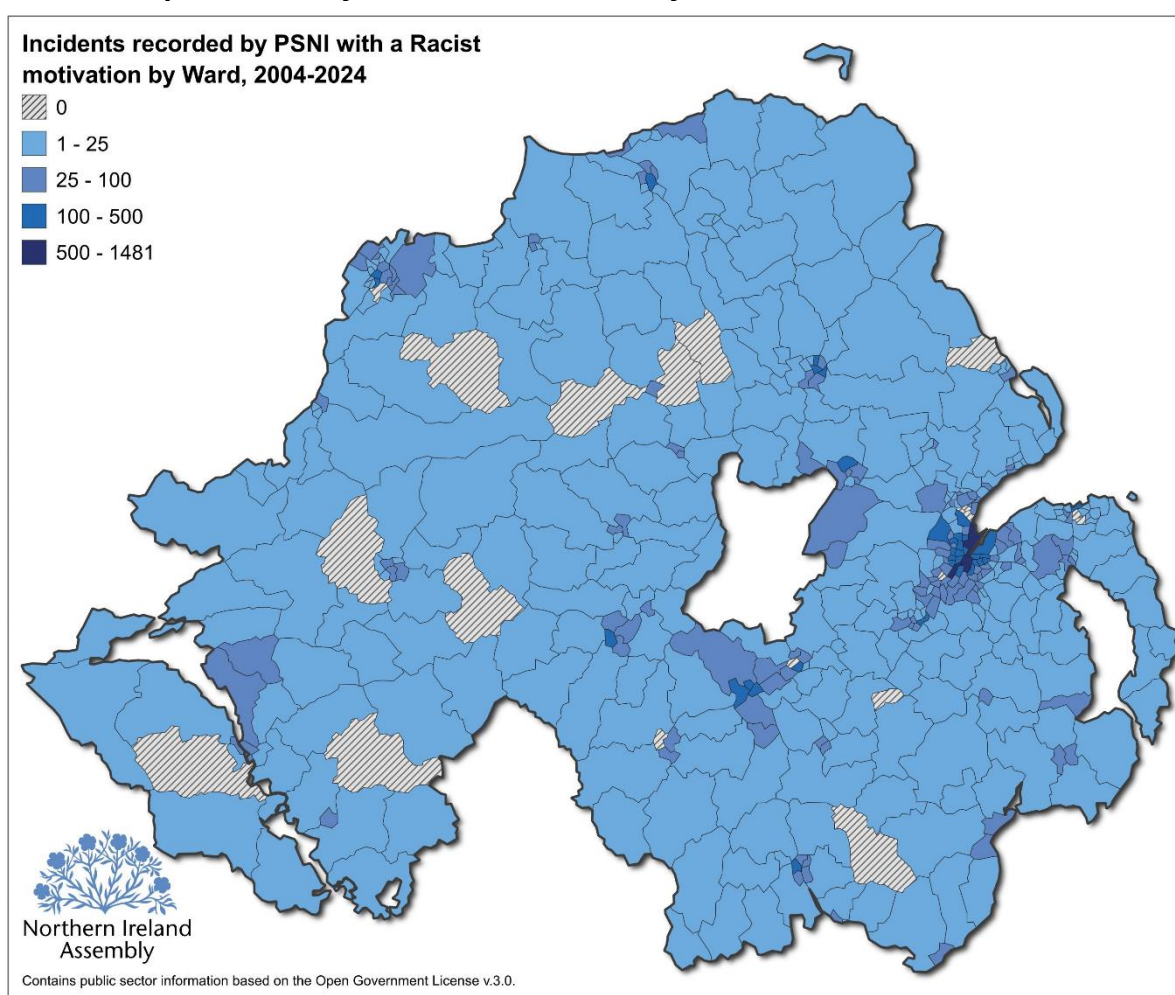
It is important to note that, since 2016, the number of racist incidents recorded by the PSNI has exceeded the number of sectarian incidents. In 2023/24, for example, there were 1,353 incidents with a racist motivation, compared with 1,091 incidents with a sectarian motivation⁸. The significance of these figures lies in the fact that, while sectarian incidents can potentially affect around 89 per cent of the population (i.e. residents with a Protestant or Catholic community background), racist incidents are

⁸ PSNI (2024) **Hate motivations tables, period ending 30th June 2024**. Available at: <https://www.psni.police.uk/system/files/2024-08/2054777380/Hate%20Motivations%20Tables%20Period%20Ending%2030th%20June%202024.xlsx>

associated with less than 4 per cent of the population. In effect, this means that the likelihood of a member of the Black and minority ethnic (BME) community experiencing a racially-motivated incident is considerably higher than the likelihood of a member of the dominant communities experiencing an incident with a sectarian motivation⁹.

In addition, incidents and crimes with a racist motivation are more widespread in Northern Ireland than is generally realised. Map 4.1 shows the number of racist incidents which occurred in the 462 electoral wards (Ward 2014 geography) in Northern Ireland over the period, 2004 – 2024. In only 12 wards were there no reported incidents during this time (coloured grey on the map).

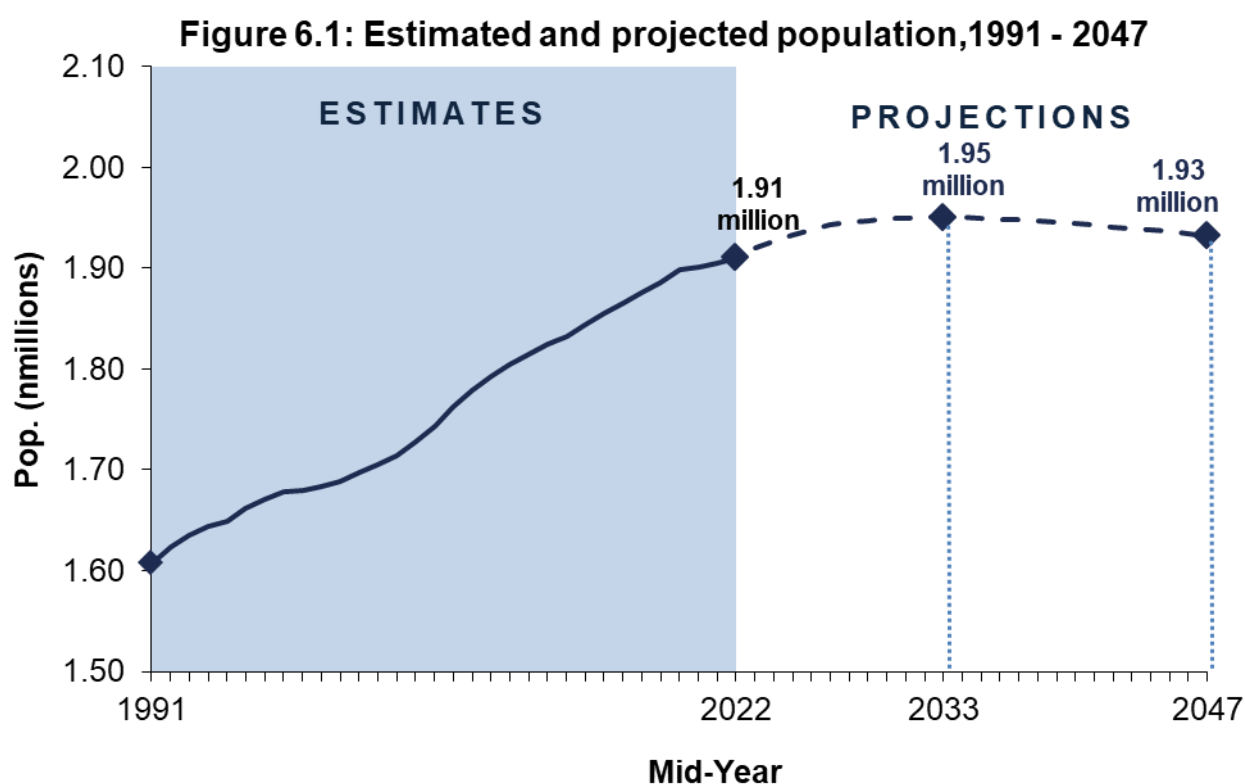
Map 4.1 Racially-motivated incidents by Electoral Ward, 2004 - 2024



⁹ Using the 2023/24 race incident figures from the PSNI, and Census 2021 figures for the BME and Protestant/Catholic populations, then the likelihood of a BME individual experiencing a racist incident is **21 times higher** than the likelihood of a member of the majority (Protestant/Catholic community) experiencing a sectarian incident.

5 International Migration and Population Projections

In mid-2022, the population in Northern Ireland was estimated to be 1,911,000 people. By mid-2033, the population is projected to increase by 39,000 people to 1,950,000. Thereafter, the population is projected to decline, and by mid-2047 will fall to an estimated 1,932,000 (Fig 6.1) ¹⁰.



Source: NISRA (2025) 2022-based Interim Population Projections for Northern Ireland, Statistical Bulletin, Fig 2.

Historically, natural change (births minus deaths) has been the main driver of population growth in Northern Ireland. According to NISRA (2025), this scenario is likely to change, and result in migration becoming the dominant factor. This is because, while the annual number of births is projected to decrease, the annual number of deaths is projected to increase substantially (more deaths occur in an ageing population). Meanwhile, migration is expected to remain in positive territory.

¹⁰ These projections are based on the mid-2022 population estimates and assumptions relating to future fertility, mortality and migration. They are not forecasts and do not attempt to predict the impact that future government policies, changing economic circumstances or other factors might have on demographic behaviour." See NISRA (2025) Statistical Bulletin Available [here](#)

Annual births are projected to decline slowly from their present level of around 20,000 per year, while annual deaths are expected to rise sharply, from 17,000 in 2022 to 20,000 in 2033, rising thereafter to 23,000 by 2047 ¹¹. By 2035, the number of deaths is expected to exceed the number of births. This, in turn, means that, if present trends continue any population increase from 2035 onwards will be largely accounted for by international migration (net migration is projected to be typically around 3,000 people per annum over the next 25 years).

With an ageing population, and fewer young people entering the labour market, international migrants will play an increasingly important role in maintaining public services and the economy in general.

6 Summary and Conclusion

This Paper has reviewed the most recently published statistics on international migration from two perspectives, namely stocks and flows. Stocks were examined through Census 2021, the School Census, and birth statistics; while flows were reviewed by reference to administrative data (medical cards) and mid-year population estimates.

Census 2021 revealed that the total number of people belonging to a minority ethnic group stood at 65,600 people (3.4% of the population), with the largest groups composed of mixed ethnicities, Black, Indian, Chinese and Filipino residents. People with a minority ethnic classification have quadrupled in 20 years, from 14,300 in 2001. The census also revealed that the growing diversity of the Northern Ireland population is not evenly spread across all areas. One example is the Botanic area of South Belfast, where almost a quarter (24%) of residents were born outside the UK and Ireland, compared with 6.3 per cent for Northern Ireland as a whole.

As a consequence of international migration, the school population is also becoming more diverse. The School Census showed there are nearly 21,000 'newcomer' pupils, compared with 8,700 in 2011. In some primary schools, the proportion of such pupils exceeds 50 per cent of the total school population.

¹¹ NISRA (2025) Components of Change, Principal Projection – Northern Ireland Summary. Available [here](#):

Birth statistics clearly show the impact of migration. Over one in ten (11.5%) of all registered births in Northern Ireland during 2022 were to mothers born outside the UK and Ireland. This figure, however, masks considerable local variability, with the proportion ranging from 4.3 per cent in Derry and Strabane LGD to 18.5 per cent, or almost one in five in Belfast.

Migration flows are compiled by NISRA using administrative data sets, notably medical card registrations and de-registrations. Using this method, it is estimated that, during the period 2000 – 2023, around 293,000 migrants arrived in Northern Ireland over that period, and 231,000 left, leaving a net total international migration flow of 62,000 people. Up until 2020, Poland was the top country of origin for international migrants coming to live in Northern Ireland. Since Brexit, however, inward migration from Europe has fallen sharply, and the latest figures (2023) show that India, Ireland and Nigeria are now the top three countries of origin for new medical card registrations from outside the UK. The data also reveals that most migrants are young, with an estimated 87 per cent under the age of 35 years.

Hate crime – incidents and crimes with a perceived racist motivation – has been a feature of life in Northern Ireland since the Millennium. Since 2016 the number of racist incidents recorded by the PSNI has exceeded the number of sectarian incidents. Racist incidents are also more widespread than commonly realised: during the period 2004 – 2024 there were only 12 wards where no racist incidents were reported during this time.

Recent population projections produced by NISRA (2025) indicate that international migration is likely to become the dominant factor in population change in Northern Ireland. This is because present trends show that, while birth rates continue to fall, death rates are rising sharply, and by 2035, the number of deaths is expected to exceed the number of births. With an ageing population, and a growing shortage of young people moving into the labour market, a regular flow of young, international migrants will be essential to maintain public services and the economy in general.

Documents and declarations on racial equality often refer to the twin concepts of “diversity and inclusion”. This Paper has clearly drawn attention to the growing diversity of life in Northern Ireland, with over 21,000 newcomer pupils at school. Inclusion, however, is a challenging concept for some people, as the racially-motivated violence in South Belfast during August 2024 revealed. The task for the future will be to provide a more welcoming environment for our new residents, and ensure that their

skills and talents are fully utilised to enrich the cultural and economic life of all the people of Northern Ireland.