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A Demographic Portrait of Northern Ireland

NIAR 280-25

This Paper reviews demographic trends in births, deaths, and migration in Northern Ireland, and demonstrates how the population has changed over the past two decades.

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Key Points

Population

- Just before the famine (1841), the estimated population of what is now Northern Ireland stood at 1,649,000, after which there was a long decline. The population stabilised at 1,237,000 by 1901 and began to increase thereafter. The latest census (2021) recorded a figure of 1,903,100. At 30 June 2024, Northern Ireland's population was estimated to be 1,927,900 people.
- The Northern Ireland population is ageing. In 1974, the median (average) age was 28.6 years; fifty years later (2024) it had increased to 40.3 years, with similar rises for males and females.

Births

- Similar to most Western countries, birth rates, and the number of live births in Northern Ireland, have been falling steadily in recent decades. In 1964, a total of 34,345 births were recorded; by 2024, this figure had fallen to 19,416.
- The fall would have been much steeper were it not for the growing number of births in Northern Ireland to mothers born outside the UK and Ireland. In Belfast, for example, 22 per cent of all births recorded in 2024 were to mothers born outside the British Isles.
- In terms of fertility, Northern Ireland had a total period fertility rate (TPFR) of 1.64 children per woman, well below the replacement level of 2.1.

Deaths

- Mortality rates are increasing, and the gap between births and deaths is beginning to close. In 2008, there were 25,631 births and 14,907 deaths, a difference of 10,724. By 2024, births had fallen to 19,416 while the number of deaths had risen to 18,050, a gap of only 1,366.
- The number of deaths is projected to exceed the number of births for the first time in mid-2031, and continue to be higher thereafter.

Migration

- Between 2001 and 2024, over 310,000 long-term international migrants are estimated to have arrived in Northern Ireland.
- 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). However, a re-analysis conducted by The Executive Office (2023), which included residents of a White ethnicity born in Eastern Europe, suggests the true figure may be as high as 153,000 (8.1%).

- The number of Newcomer pupils (where English is an additional language) has more than doubled in the past thirteen years, from 8,674 in 2011 to 21,352 in 2024/25, and now accounts for 6.0 per cent of all school enrolments.
- There are 75 primary schools in Northern Ireland where the proportion of Newcomers is 20 per cent or more.
- 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.
- Apart from the years ending mid-2011, mid-2013, and mid-2020, international migration to Northern Ireland has been in positive territory since 2004.
- Brexit, which ended freedom of movement for EU citizens, ushered in a significant change in migration patterns. In 2024, for example, there were only 101 registrations from Polish people compared with 3,041 from India.
- Since 2016, the number of racist crimes recorded by the PSNI has exceeded the number of sectarian crimes. In 2024/25, for example, there were 1,188 crimes with a racist motivation compared with 588 crimes with a sectarian motivation.
- At 30 September 2025, there were 2,570 asylum seekers in receipt of support in Northern Ireland.

Population Projections

- The population is projected to peak at 1.94 million in 2031, thereafter declining to 1.91 million by 2049. **Deaths** are projected to exceed **births** from 2030 onwards, creating negative natural change (i.e. births minus deaths). Migration is expected to be the main driver of population growth in the coming decades.
- Northern Ireland is projected to have the smallest population increase (-1.0%) of all four UK nations between 2024 and 2049.
- The ageing of the population is expected to continue, with the median age rising from 40.3 years in 2024 to 46.8 years in 2049.

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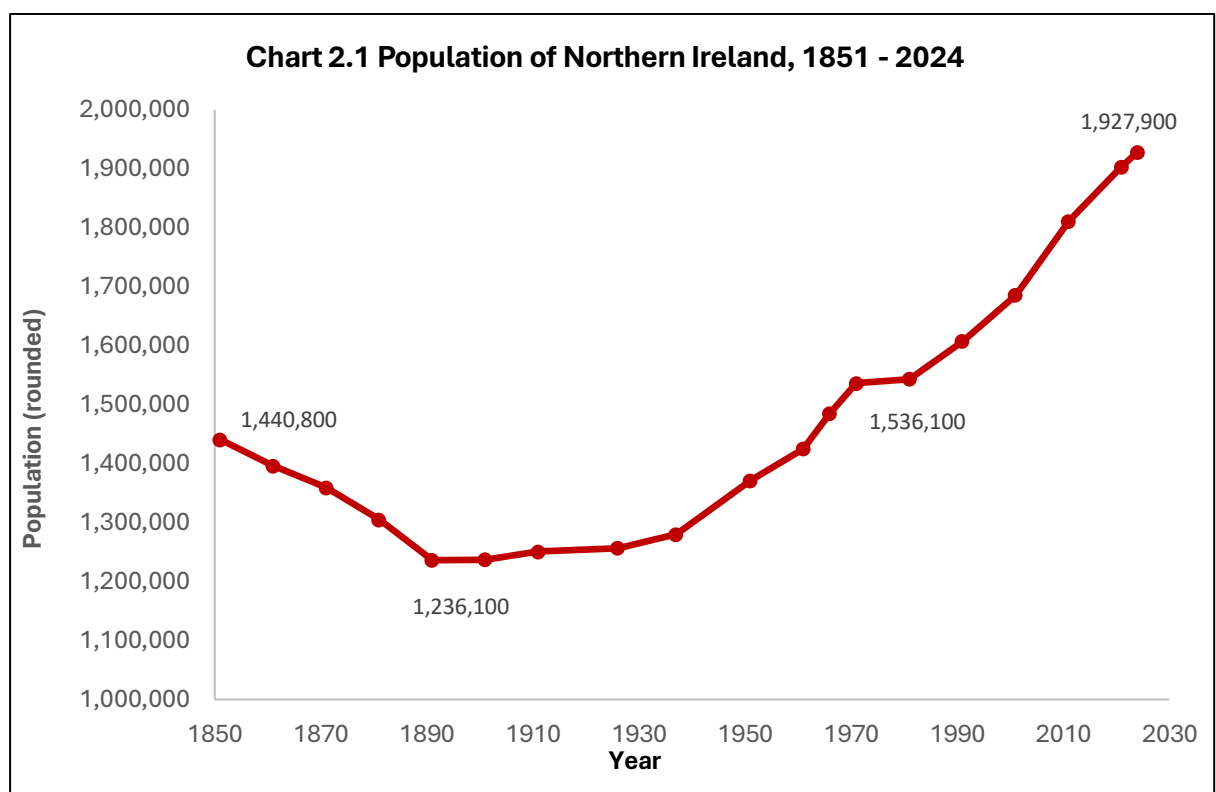
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1 Introduction

Demography is the study of human populations, focusing on their size and structure (age, sex and ethnicity). The present Paper reviews the population of Northern Ireland, and focuses on the three principal factors which together determine population change – fertility (births), mortality (deaths) and migration – to illustrate how the population has changed over time.

2 Background

Just before the famine (1841), the estimated population ¹ of what is now Northern Ireland stood at 1,649,000, after which there was a long decline. By Census 1901, the population had stabilised at 1,237,000, and began to increase from this point onwards (see Chart 2.1).



Source: NISRA (2022) Census 2021 population and household estimates for Northern Ireland, Table PS-11. Available [here](#)

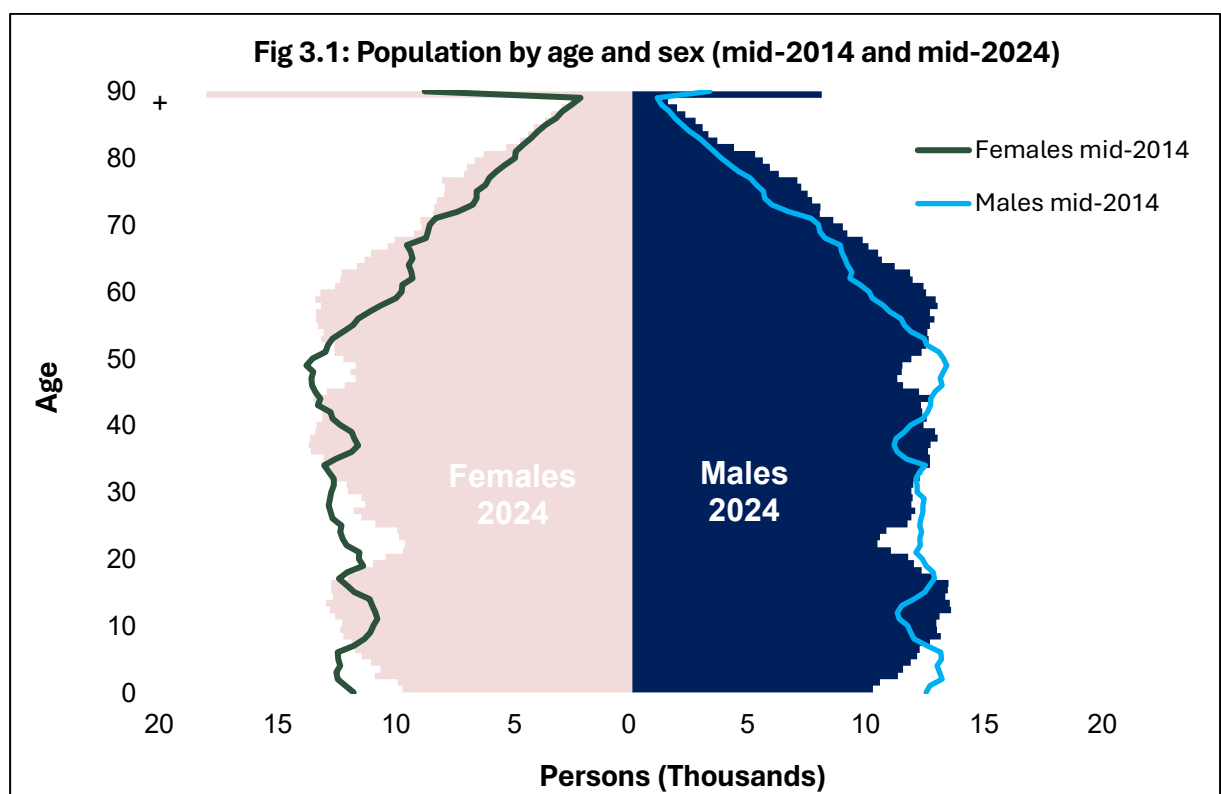
¹ Prior to 1926, the census was taken on an all-Ireland basis. The Northern Ireland census figures presented for 1851 to 1911 are a compilation of the constituent counties and the Belfast County Borough.

The first census under Northern Ireland law (1926) revealed that the population had risen to 1,256,600. By 1971, this figure had increased to 1,536,100. The population rose to 1,542,964 in 1981, 1,607,295 in 1991², and 1,685,267 in 2001. By 2011, the population had reached 1,810,863 and in 2021 the census recorded a figure of 1,903,100.

While the population has continued to rise in recent decades, average household size has continued to fall, from 4.60 in 1901 to a current figure of 2.44 (Census 2021).

3 Population of Northern Ireland 2024

At 30 June 2024, Northern Ireland's population was [estimated to be](#) 1,927,900 people. Just over half (50.7 per cent) were female, with 978,100 females compared with 949,800 males (49.3 per cent).

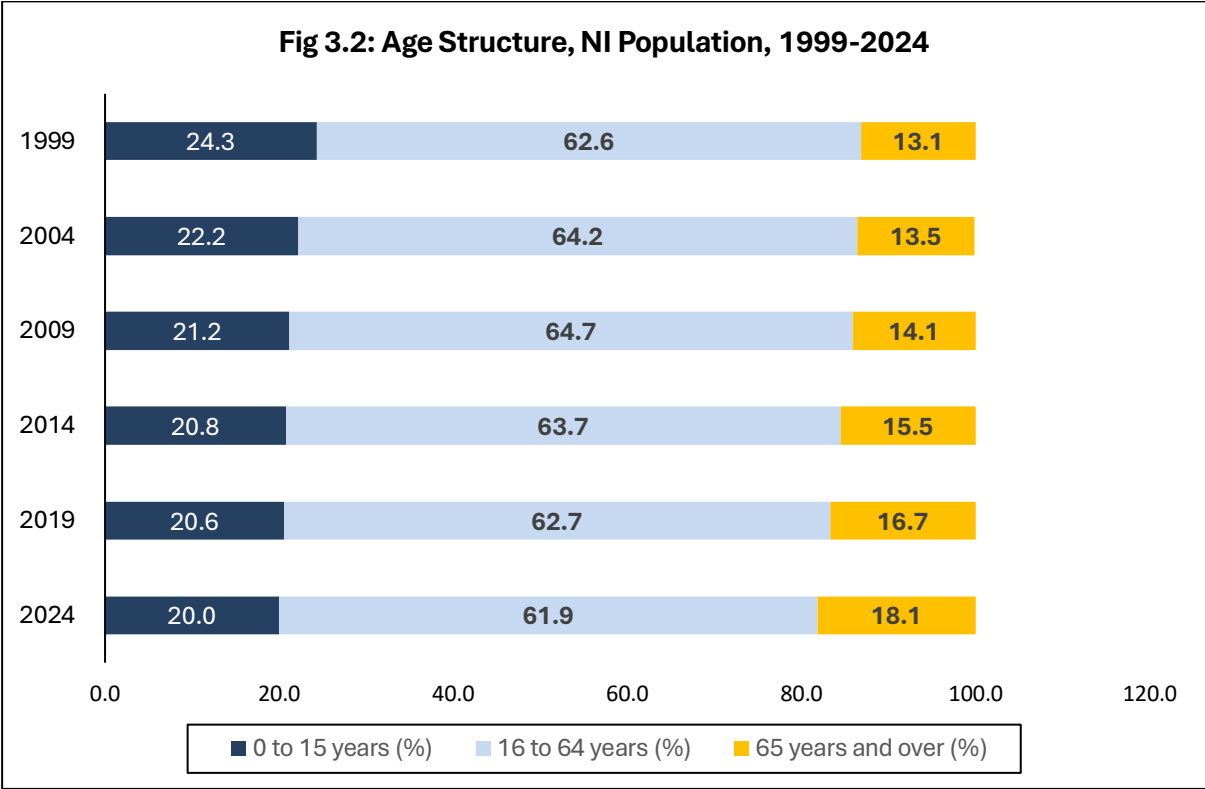


Source: NISRA (2025) 2024 Mid-Year Population Estimates for Northern Ireland. Available [here](#)

² As a result of political events at the time of Census 1981 and Census 1991, the figures for both years were generally accepted to be an under-enumeration of the population. Therefore, in Chart 2.1, and the accompanying text above, the mid-year estimates for 1981 and 1991 have been used instead of the census figures.

The age distribution of a population is an important factor to consider, since changes in the size of different age groups will have a range of economic and societal impacts (e.g. on the school estate, pensions, health and social care etc.). Figure 3.1 (above) presents a population pyramid, comparing the age composition of the population in 2014 and 2024. In 2024, the pyramid begins to broaden from age 50 onwards, indicating a growth in the number of older persons (both sexes) compared with a decade earlier.

The gradual ageing of the population is clearly visible in Figure 3.2, which shows the change in age structure through five-year increments between 1999 and 2024. In 1999, children accounted for almost one in four (24.3%) of the population. Twenty-five years later, this figure had fallen to one in five (20%).



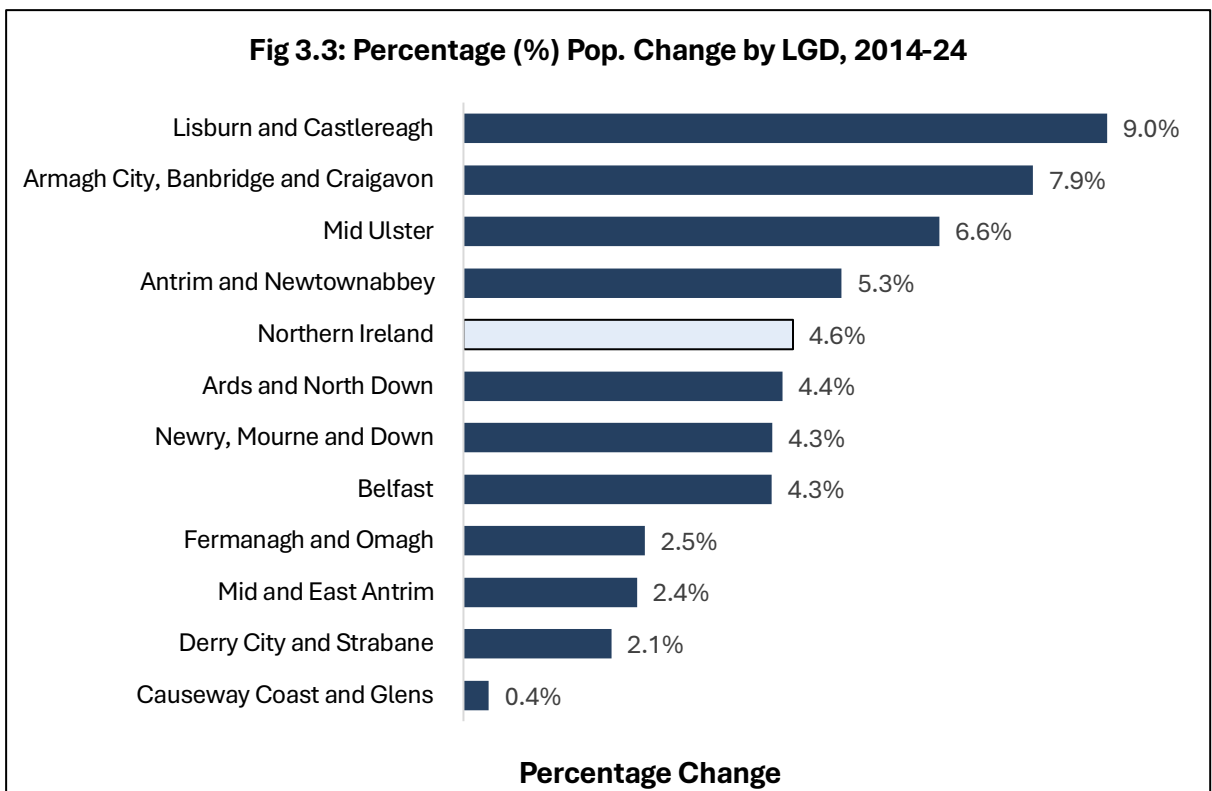
Source: NISRA (2025) 2024 Mid-Year Population Estimates for Northern Ireland. Available [here](#)

By contrast, the proportion of older people (aged 65+) rose from 13.1 per cent in 1999 to 18.1 per cent in 2024, an increase of five percentage points. The proportion of working age adults remained virtually unchanged over that period.

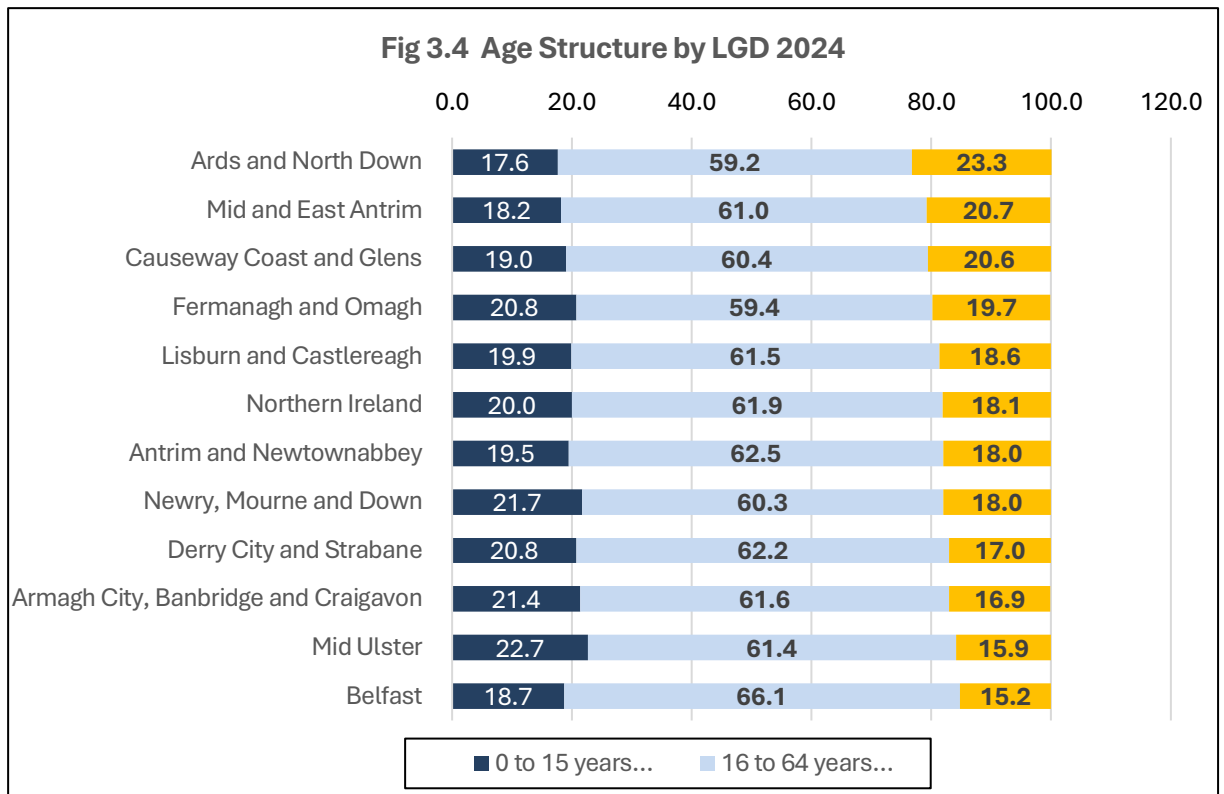
Population change in Northern Ireland has not been uniform. Instead, as the following section will show, it varies across each of the eleven local government districts (LGDs).

3.1 Population Change by LGD

Figure 3.3 illustrates the percentage change in population for each LGD over the period, 2014 – 2024. Lisburn and Castlereagh council area (9.0%) had the largest population growth over the decade, followed by Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon (7.9%) and Mid Ulster (6.6%). Inward migration was a major contributory factor, notably in Armagh City and Mid Ulster. The council areas with the smallest population increases were Causeway Coast and Glens (0.4%), Derry City and Strabane (2.1%) and Mid and East Antrim (2.4%). The population of Belfast rose by 4.3 per cent during this period.



Source: NISRA (2025) Mid-Year Population Estimates for 2024, Statistical Report. Available [here](#)



Source: NISRA (2025) Mid-Year Population Estimates for 2024, Statistical Report. Available [here](#)

Fig 3.4 (above) shows the age distribution of the population in each of the eleven LGDs in 2024. It reveals that Ards and North Down had the lowest proportion of children (17.6%) and the highest proportion of **older people** aged 65 and over (23.3%). In contrast, Mid Ulster had the highest proportion of **children** (i.e. people aged 0-15) among its population (22.7%) and the second lowest proportion of older people (15.9%).

Belfast LGD had the highest proportion of the **working age population** (i.e. people aged 16 - 64) among its population (66.1%) and the lowest proportion of older people (15.2%).

3.2 Median Age

Trends in the median age³ provide further evidence of an ageing population. Table 3.1 shows the median age by gender over the past five decades, 1974 – 2024.

In 1974, the median age of the population was 28.6 years; fifty years later it had increased to 40.3 years, with similar rises for males and females.

Table 3.1: Median Age by Gender, Northern Ireland, 1974 – 2024

	1974	1984	1994	2004	2014	2024
All persons	28.6	29.6	32.0	35.7	38.1	40.3
Females	30.4	31.5	33.4	36.8	39.0	41.3
Males	27.1	27.9	30.6	34.6	37.0	39.3

Source: NISRA (2025) Mid-Year Population Estimates for 2024, Statistical Report. Available [here](#)

There are significant regional variations in the median age across Northern Ireland. Table 3.2 presents the figures for the median age by LGD in 2001 compared with 2023. It reveals that in 2023 there was a difference of 8.9 years between the council area with the highest median age (Ards and North Down 45.3 years) and the lowest (Belfast, 36.4 years).

Table 3.2: Median Age (in years) by LGD, 2001 – 2023

LGD	2001	2023	Change (in years)
Ards and North Down	38.4	45.3	6.9
Mid and East Antrim	36.7	43.7	7.0
Causeway Coast and Glens	34.9	43.1	8.2
Fermanagh and Omagh	34.1	41.8	7.7
Lisburn and Castlereagh	36.4	41.4	5.0
Antrim and Newtownabbey	35.3	41.0	5.7
Newry, Mourne and Down	33.3	40.5	7.2
Derry City and Strabane	31.5	40.0	8.5
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon	34.4	39.6	5.2
Mid Ulster	32.6	38.4	5.8
Belfast	34.3	36.4	2.1

Source: NISRA (2025) Median Age (all areas). Available [here](#)

³ The **median age** is the middle point of a population's age distribution, where exactly half the people are older and half are younger.

This section of the Paper has reviewed the current population of Northern Ireland (2024/25). In the following section(s), the Paper explores the three components which together influence demographic change, namely fertility (births), mortality (deaths) and migration.

4 Births

Similar to most Western Countries, birth rates, and the number of live births in Northern Ireland, have been falling steadily in recent decades. Table 4.1 clearly illustrates this trend by presenting birth statistics for the series 1964 – 2024 (ten-year intervals). In 1964, a total of 34,345 births were recorded; by 2024, this figure had fallen to 19,416.

Table 4.1 Live Births by Sex, 1964 – 2024

	1964	1974	1984	1994	2004	2014	2024
All persons	34,345	27,160	27,477	24,098	22,318	24,394	19,416
Males	17,615	13,987	14,196	12,361	11,477	12,543	9,989
Females	16,730	13,173	13,281	11,737	10,841	11,851	9,427

Source: NISRA (2016, 2025) Registrar General Annual Reports, Birth Statistics. Available [here](#)

The observed fall in the number of births during the past few decades would have been much steeper were it not for the growing number of births in Northern Ireland to mothers born outside the UK and Ireland.

4.1 Births to Mothers born outside UK and Ireland

Table 4.2 presents the number of births (at five-year intervals), 1997 – 2024, in Northern Ireland broken down by country of birth of the mother. The final column in the table shows the combined percentage of births to mothers born in the EU A8⁴ plus the rest of the world.

⁴ The European Union A8 Accession countries are the eight Central and Eastern European nations that joined the EU on May 1, 2004: **Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia.**

Table 4.2 Births in Northern Ireland by Country of Birth of Mother, 1997 – 2024

Registration Year	All countries	NI, other UK, ROI	A8	Rest of World ⁵	Not Stated	A8 + Rest of World (%)
1997	24,087	23,518	2	542	25	2.6%
2002	21,385	20,640	16	708	21	3.9%
2007	24,451	22,504	775	1,170	2	8.9%
2012	25,269	22,810	1,201	1,258	-	10.8%
2017	23,075	20,654	1,041	1,380	0	10.5%
2022	20,837	18,435	632	1,770	0	11.5%
2023	19,962	17,555	507	1,900	0	12.1%
2024	19,416	16,926	446	2,044	0	12.8%

Source: NISRA (2016, 2025) Registrar General Annual Reports, Birth Statistics, Available [here](#)

In 1997, only two babies in Northern Ireland were born to mothers from the EU A8 countries. By 2008, this figure had risen to 1,080, and hovered around the 1,200 mark for some years. After Brexit, however, births to A8 mothers declined, reaching a low of 446 in 2024. Births to mothers born in the rest of the world (excluding the UK, Ireland, and the A8) have also increased substantially, from 542 in 1997 to 2,044 in 2024. Table 4.2 shows that births to mothers born outside the UK and Ireland now account for around 13 per cent of all births in Northern Ireland each year. The comparable figure in 1997 was 2.6 per cent.

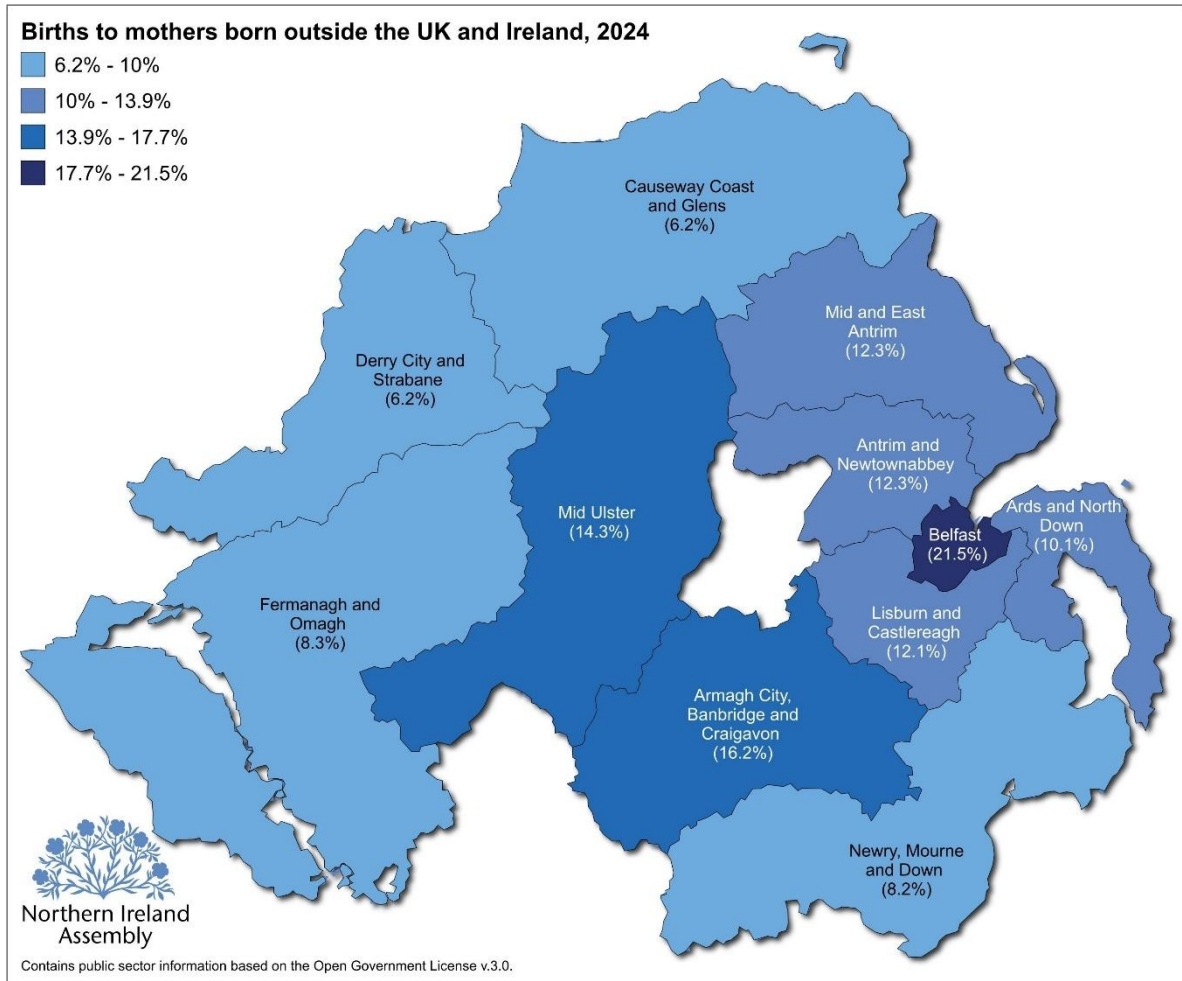
Map 4.1 (overleaf) shows the proportion of births to non-UK and Ireland born mothers by LGD in 2024. Belfast (21.5%), Mid Ulster (14.3%) and Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon (16.2%) have the highest proportion of such births, while Derry City and Strabane council area (6.2%) has the lowest proportion.

The significant fall since 2021 in the number of births to mothers born in the EU, and the simultaneous rise in the number of births to non-EU mothers, reflects broader trends in migration patterns post-Brexit (See Chart 4.2). Portes (2016), in an analysis of the impact of Brexit on immigration to the UK, found by 2024 there was a reduction in the number of EU-born workers of about 785,000 and an increase in non-EU workers of around 992,000. In brief, the end of free movement of EU workers after Brexit

⁵ Rest of World excludes births to mothers born in Northern Ireland, GB, Republic of Ireland and the EU A8 Accession countries.

resulted in a significant reduction in EU migrants and a substantial increase in non-EU migration ⁶.

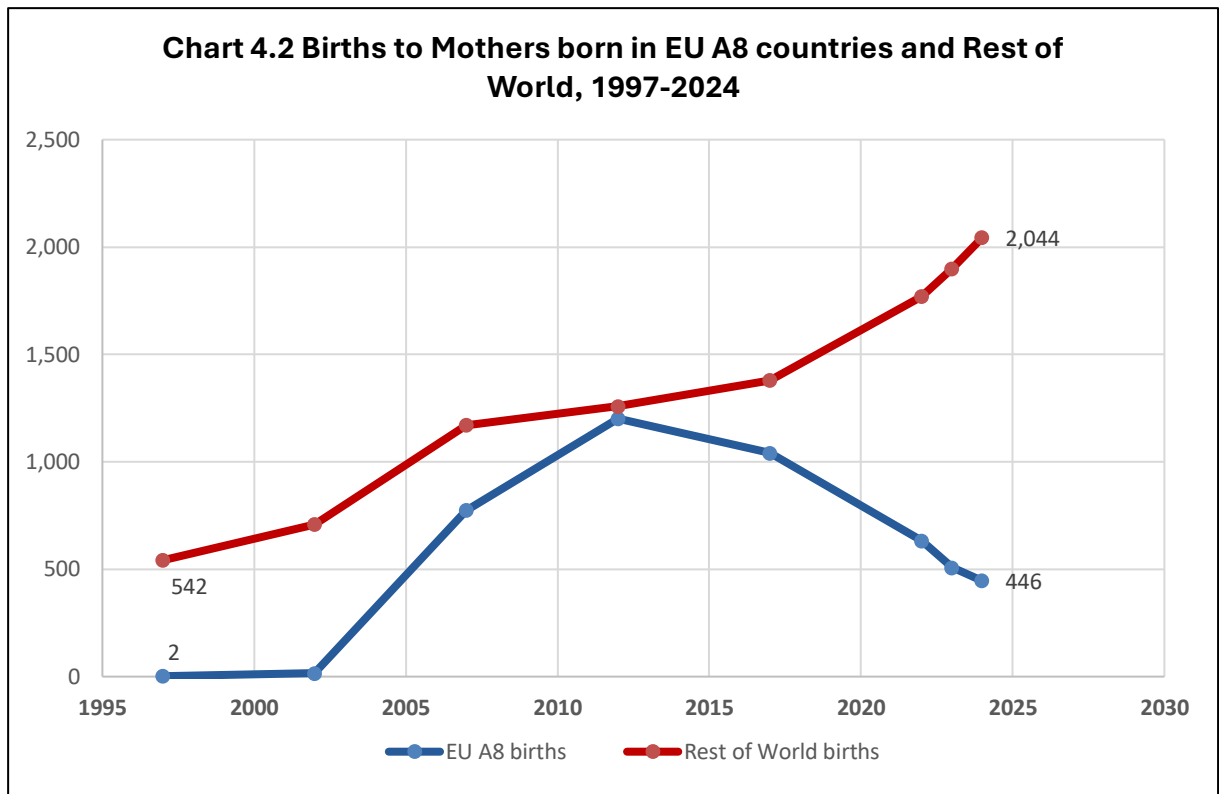
Map 4.1 Births to mothers born outside UK and Ireland, 2024



Source: NISRA (2025) Long-term International Migration (2024) – official migration estimates (Inflows).

Available [here](#)

⁶ Portes, J. and Springford, J. (2026) **The impact of Brexit on Immigration to the UK**. Centre for European Reform, 9 March 2026. Available at : https://www.cer.eu/sites/default/files/JP_JS_brexit_immigration_6.3.26.pdf



Source: NISRA (2016, 2025) Registrar General Annual Reports, Birth Statistics, Available [here](#)

The [Registrar General's Annual Report 2024](#) contains a number of significant findings regarding births in Northern Ireland, namely:

- The average age of first-time mothers was 29.6 years, more than three years older than in 1994 (26.3 years).
- 46.0 per cent of births occurred outside of marriage/ civil partnership, compared with 22.1 per cent three decades ago.
- The average age of mothers in 2024 was 31.5 years, a marginal increase from 2023 (31.4). By way of comparison, in 1994 the average age of mothers was 28.6 years.
- As noted above, 12.8 per cent of births were to mothers who were born outside of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. This compares with 5.0 per cent 20 years ago.

As the following section reveals, the observed fall in the number of live births in Northern Ireland in recent decades is closely associated with a corresponding fall in fertility levels.

4.2 Fertility Rates

Table 4.3 presents fertility rates across the four UK nations and the Republic of Ireland for the period, 1992 – 2023. The table shows that fertility rates across the UK and Ireland are generally falling, with 2023 data showing Northern Ireland had the highest total period fertility rate (TPFR) ⁷ at 1.64 children per woman, followed by England (1.44), Wales (1.39) and Scotland lowest at 1.30. In common with most western countries, all UK nations are well below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman ⁸, with Northern Ireland traditionally maintaining higher rates than the rest of the UK.

Table 4.3: Fertility Rates in the UK nations and Ireland, 1992 - 2023

TFR	1992	1997	2002	2007	2012	2017	2022	2023
N. Ireland	2.16	1.93	1.76	1.98	2.03	1.85	1.71	1.64
England	1.79	1.73	1.64	1.88	1.93	1.71	1.49	1.44
Wales	1.87	1.81	1.64	1.86	1.88	1.70	1.46	1.39
Scotland	1.67	1.59	1.47	1.70	1.68	1.51	1.33	1.30
UK	1.79	1.72	1.63	1.87	1.91	1.70	1.48	1.43
Rep. Ireland	1.99	1.94	1.98	2.03	1.98	1.77	1.70	1.50

Source: Public Health Agency (2025) **Table 2.1, Children’s Health in Northern Ireland 2023/24.**
Available [here](#)

While it is beyond the scope of this Paper to analyse the reasons for the continuing fall in fertility rates across the developed world, including the UK and Ireland, it is probable that factors such as the lack of affordable housing, high cost of childcare, and various cultural factors may be implicated.

⁷ **Total Period Fertility Rate** in a specific year is defined as the total number of children that would be born to each woman if she were to live to the end of her child-bearing years and give birth to children in alignment with the prevailing age-specific fertility rates (OECD, available [here](#)).

⁸ **Replacement level fertility** is the level of fertility at which a population exactly replaces itself from one generation to the next. In developed countries, replacement level fertility requires an average of 2.1 children per woman. This rate ensures that enough children are born to replace their parents and sustain the population size, preventing decline. Source: Craig, J. (1994) *Replacement level fertility and future population growth*. Population Trends, 1994, Winter (78), 20-2. Available [here](#)

As the following section will demonstrate, while birth rates are falling in Northern Ireland, the number of deaths are beginning an inexorable rise, with significant consequences for the population.

5 Deaths

Deaths occur more frequently in an ageing population. Table 5.1 lists the number of deaths at five-year intervals between 1994 – 2024. The table reveals that mortality rates remained relatively stable between 1994 and 2019 but have started to rise since then ⁹.

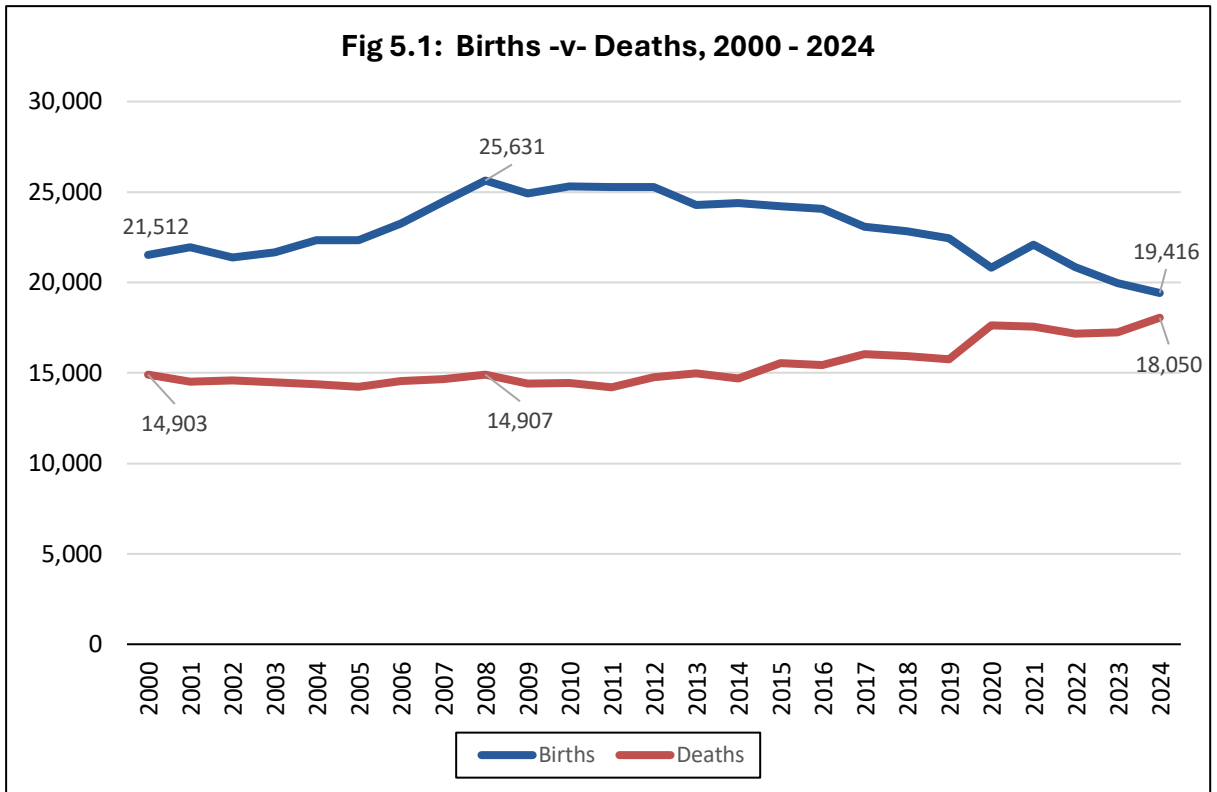
Table 5.1: Deaths by Sex, 1994 – 2024

	Male	Female	All
1994	7,362	7,752	15,114
1999	7,464	8,199	15,663
2004	6,935	7,419	14,354
2009	6,914	7,499	14,413
2014	7,024	7,654	14,678
2019	7,790	7,968	15,758
2022	8,548	8,611	17,159
2023	8,571	8,683	17,254
2024	9,234	8,816	18,050

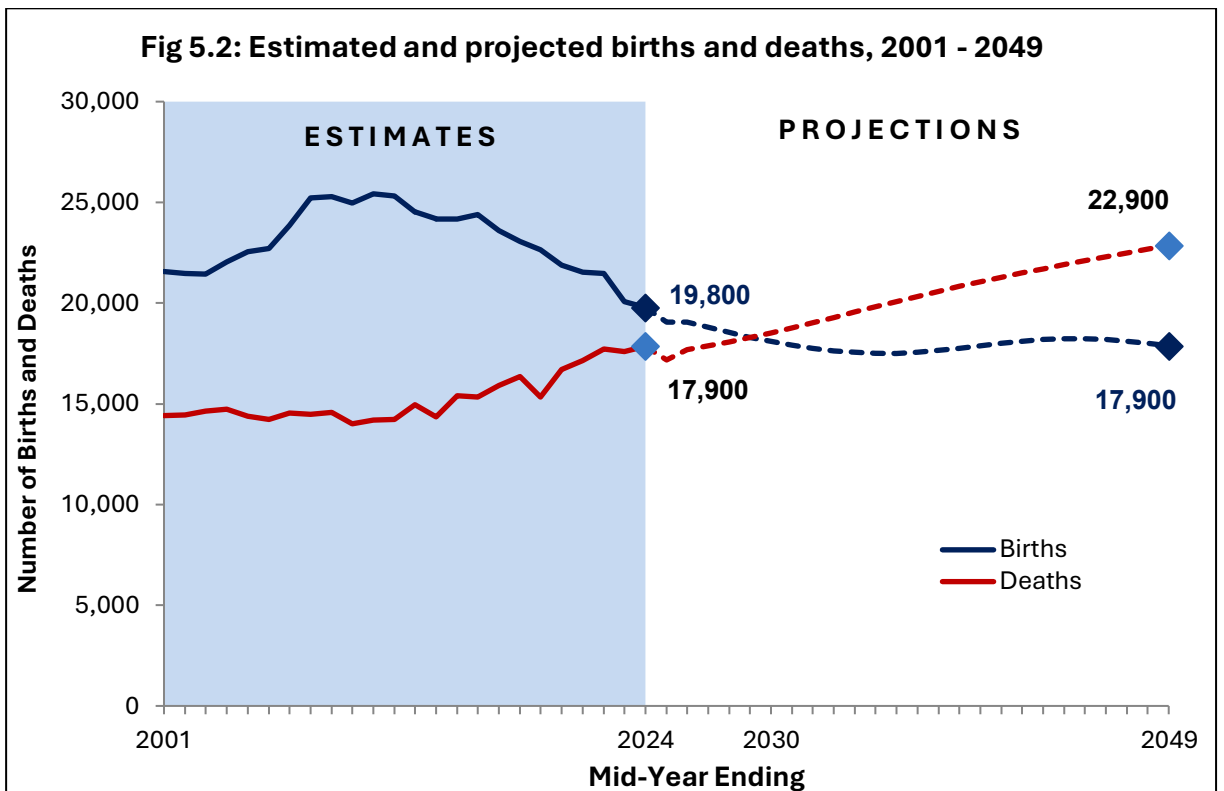
Source: NISRA (2025) Registrar General Annual Report, Death statistics, Table 5.1. Available [here](#)

Figure 5.1 presents a visual comparison of births and deaths in Northern Ireland during the past twenty-five years (2000 – 2024). It shows that the gap between births and deaths is beginning to close. In 2008, for example, there were 25,631 births and 14,907 deaths, a difference of 10,724. By 2024, births had fallen to 19,416 while the number of deaths had risen to 18,050, a gap of only 1,366. Fig 5.2 illustrates the latest population projections (2024-based) for births and deaths. It shows that the number of deaths is projected to exceed the number of births for the first time in mid-2030, and continue to be higher for the rest of the projection period (until 2049).

⁹ The increase in deaths since 2019 can be partially accounted for by the Covid-19 pandemic. There were 3,692 deaths [involving Covid-19 in Northern Ireland](#) between 1 March 2020 and 31 October 2021, accounting for 13.0% of all deaths during this period. This figure does not include deaths resulting from the knock-on effects of the Pandemic on other health conditions, such as late diagnosis and reduced hospital visits etc.



Source: NISRA (2026) 2024-based Population Projections – Statistical Bulletin. Available [here](#).



Population growth is a function of two factors, namely **natural increase** (births minus deaths) and **migration**. When the number of deaths exceeds the number of births, the

population is no longer being replaced and will begin to decline, unless net migration moves into positive territory.

6 Migration

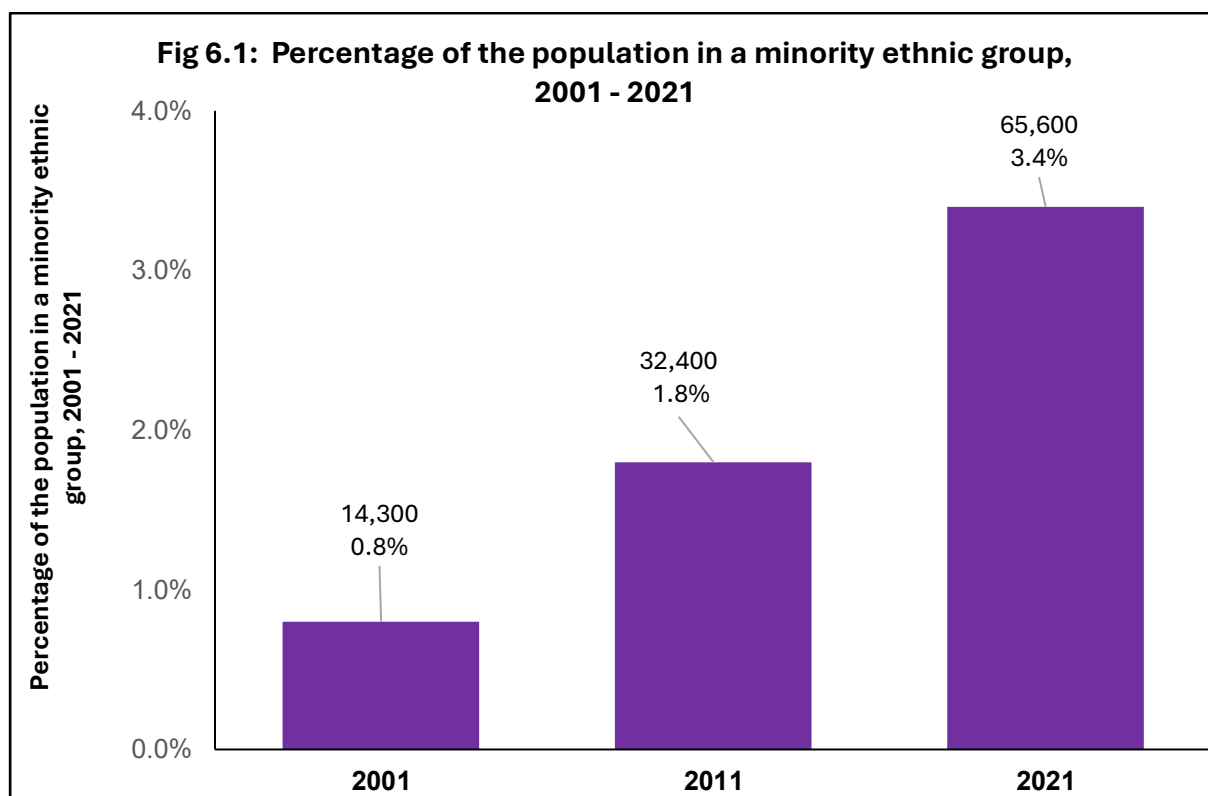
Since the Millennium, Northern Ireland has witnessed an unprecedented wave of international migration, initially from Central and Eastern Europe, but more recently from Africa and Asia. Between 2001 and 2024, over 310,000 long-term international migrants are estimated to have arrived in Northern Ireland. 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.

6.1 Migration Stocks

Fig 6.1 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. 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.

However, using the Census question on *Ethnic Group* alone to quantify diversity does not provide a full picture of the range of ethnicities in Northern Ireland. In particular, there are a number of white, minority ethnic communities (e.g. Polish, Lithuanian, Romanian and Bulgarian) living here who, although included in the White census category, are perceived to be members of a minority ethnic group. Therefore, The Executive Office and NISRA re-analysed the Census 2021 data by combining *Ethnic Group*, *National Identity* and *Religion*. In doing so, there was a recognition that the diversity of an individual is not solely based on skin colour, but there are other national and cultural aspects to take into account as well.



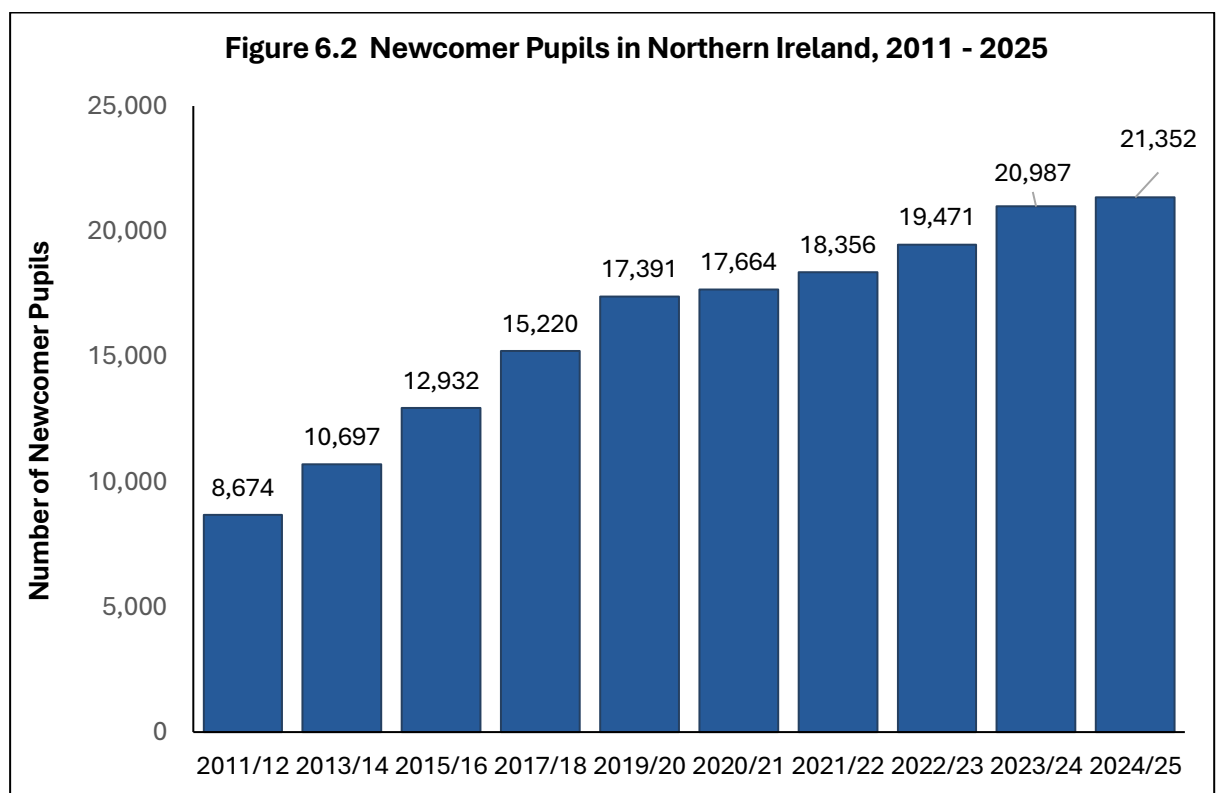
Source: NISRA (2022) Statistical Bulletin – Ethnic Group.

The re-analysis yielded an additional figure of 4.7 per cent (87,000) people from a minority ethnic background. When added to the Census 2021 figure (3.4%) this suggests that the true figure for minority ethnic group membership is around 8.1 per cent (153,000) of the population.

As the next section will demonstrate, the growing diversity of life in Northern Ireland is reflected in the composition of the school population.

6.2 Newcomer Pupils

Schools in Northern Ireland are becoming increasingly ethnically diverse, with a growing 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. This category, which has previously been referred to as English as an Additional Language, is primarily composed of children from a minority ethnic background.



Source: Department of Education (2025) Annual Enrolments at Schools and in Funded Pre-school Education in Northern Ireland, 2024-25, Table 6b. Available [here](#)

Figure 6.2 (above) illustrates trends in the number of Newcomer pupils enrolled in Northern Ireland schools (all types) during the period commencing October 2011 until October 2024. The chart reveals that the number of Newcomer pupils has more than doubled in the past thirteen years, from 8,674 in 2011 to 21,352 in 2024/25, and now accounts for 6.0 per cent of all school enrolments.

In some schools the proportion of Newcomer pupils is much higher than the average figure, including 75 primary schools where the percentage is 20 per cent or more ¹⁰. Table 6.1 lists the ten primary schools with the largest proportion of Newcomer pupils. The list includes schools in Belfast, Ballymena, Dungannon, Portadown and Armagh.

Table 6.1 Ten Primary Schools with highest proportion of Newcomer Pupils, 2024/25

Primary School	No. of Newcomer Pupils	Per cent (%) Newcomers	Total school Population
Presentation Primary School, Portadown	244	92.1%	265
St Patrick's Primary School, Dungannon	772	88.0%	877
Fane Street Primary School, Belfast	243	82.1%	296
Dungannon Primary School	236	73.8%	320
Botanic Primary School, Belfast	145	70.4%	206
St Mary's Primary School, Belfast	90	68.2%	132
Ballymena Primary School	131	60.6%	216
Harryville Primary School, Ballymena	137	59.8%	229
Mount St Catherine's Primary School, Armagh	93	58.5%	159
Holy Rosary Primary School, Belfast	233	53.3%	437

Source: Department of Education (2025) School level – primary schools data, 2024/25. Available [here](#)

For example, in October 2024, 244 out of 265 pupils (92.1%) in Presentation Primary School, Portadown were Newcomers, while in Botanic Primary School, 70.4 per cent were Newcomers.

Table 6.2 contains the same information as in Table 6.1, this time for post-primary schools. In total, there are five schools where the percentage of Newcomers is 20 per cent or more, and 20 schools where the proportion is 10 per cent or more. In two schools – St. Patrick's College, Ballymena and St. Patrick's College, Dungannon – nearly half (47.8%) of the school population is from a minority ethnic background. Three of the top ten schools are in Dungannon (Mid Ulster Assembly Area).

¹⁰ Department of Education (2025) School level data – Primary Schools data. Available [here](#)

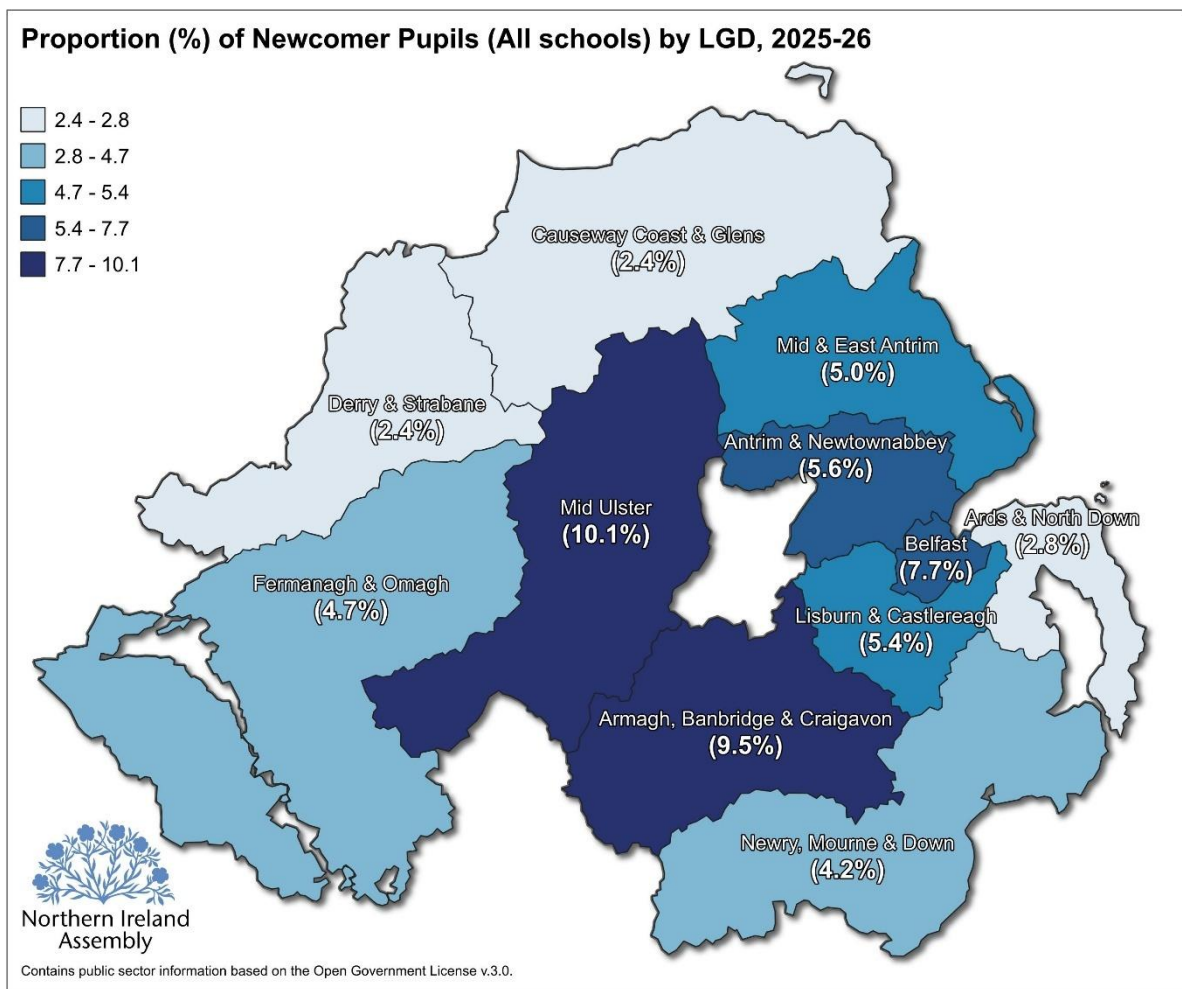
Table 6.2 Ten Post-Primary Schools with highest proportion of Newcomer Pupils, 2024/25

Post-Primary School	No. of Newcomer Pupils	Per cent (%) Newcomers	Total school Population
St Patrick's College, Ballymena	199	47.8%	416
St Patrick's College, Dungannon	409	47.8%	855
St John the Baptist's College, Portadown	226	41.6%	543
City of Armagh High School	126	31.2%	404
Integrated College Dungannon	160	21.2%	754
Erne Integrated College, Enniskillen	59	19.2%	307
Omagh High School	83	18.6%	447
Brownlow College, Craigavon	77	18.4%	418
Drumglass High School, Dungannon	62	15.5%	400
Breda Academy, Belfast	121	14.6%	828

Source: Department of Education (2025) School level data – post-primary schools, 2024/25. Available [here](#)

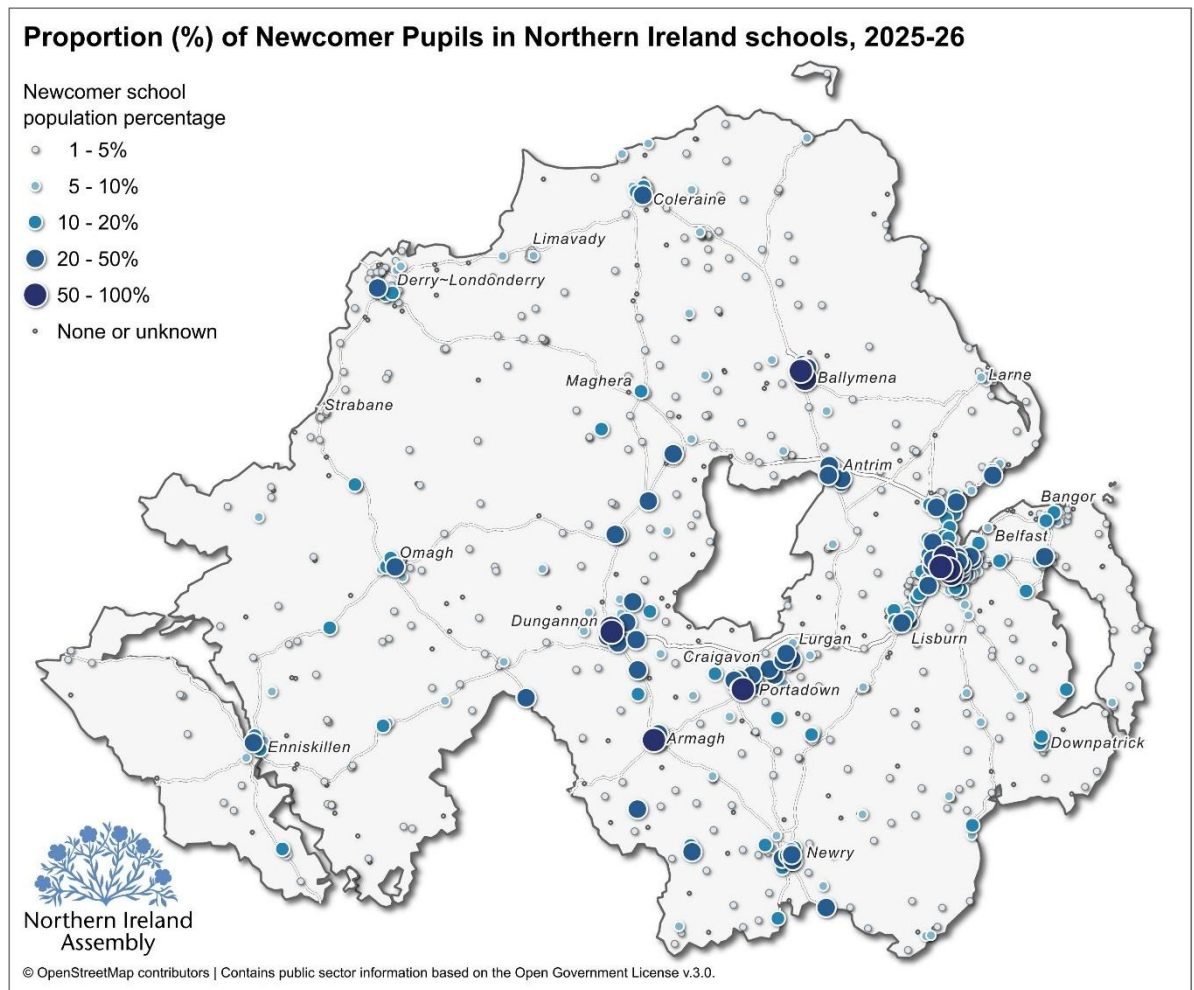
Map 6.1 (overleaf) shows the proportion (%) of Newcomer pupils in all schools (primary and post-primary) in each of the eleven local government districts (LGDs) in October 2024. Mid Ulster (10.1%) and Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon (9.5%) had the highest proportion of such pupils, followed by Belfast (7.7%), while Derry City and Strabane, and Causeway Coast and Glens (2.4%) had the smallest proportion.

Map 6.1 Proportion of Newcomer Pupils (all schools) by LGD, 2025-26



Map 6.2 (overleaf) illustrates the proportion of Newcomer pupils (all schools) this time by school postcode. It highlights the concentration of Newcomer pupils in Armagh, Dungannon, Portadown, Craigavon, Lurgan and Newry, as well as in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry.

Map 6.2 Proportion of Newcomer Pupils (all schools) by School Postcode 2025-26



6.3 Migration flows

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 2023 and June 2024). There are no estimates for short-term / temporary migration.

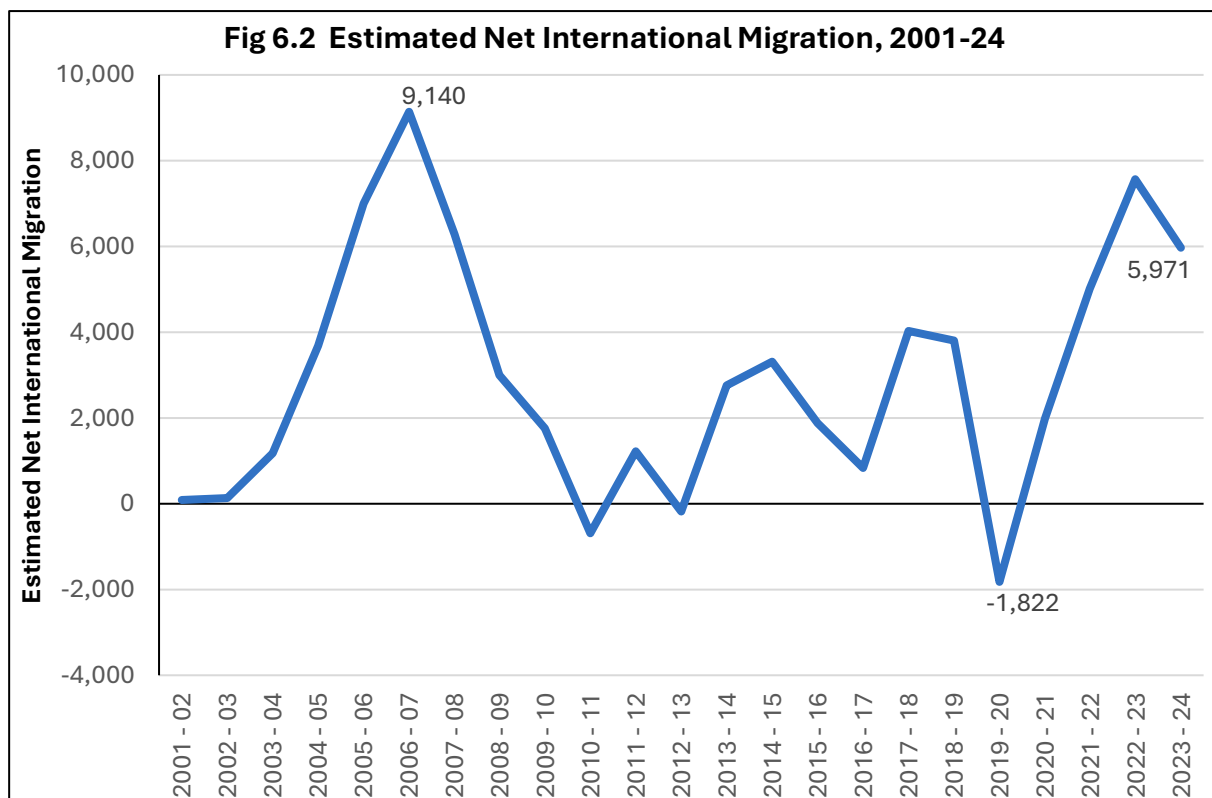
According to NISRA (2025), migration is the most difficult component of population change to measure ¹¹. In Northern Ireland, migration *inflows* and *outflows* are estimated

¹¹ NISRA (2025) Summary Quality Report: Mid-year Population Estimates. Available [here](#)

from the Medical Card Register, which is a list of patients registered with a GP. It is recognised that the Medical Card Register is deficient in recording young adult males, and that not all outflows are measured fully by the Register. Therefore, the estimates are adjusted and upscaled to take account of these two factors ¹².

6.4 Net International Migration, an Overview

Fig 6.2 and Table 6.3 (overleaf) present estimates for net international migration flows during the period 2000 – 2024. An estimated 310,000 migrants arrived in Northern Ireland over that period, and 242,000 left, leaving a net total international migration flow of 68,000 people.



Source: NISRA (2025) Long-term International Migration (2024) – official migration estimates (Stocks). Available [here](#):

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 nationals, the exceptions being the UK, Ireland and Sweden. With comparatively free

¹² The age distribution of young adult males is adjusted to be similar to the young adult female distribution, and de-registrations (outflows) are scaled up by an additional 67 per cent (i.e. it is assumed that only three out of five persons who leave Northern Ireland to go abroad deregister with their family GP).

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 2,800 people.

Table 6.3 Estimated Net International Migration, 2001 – 2024

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
Jul 2023 – Jun 2024	16,851	10,880	5,971
Total	310,232	242,283	67,949

Source: NISRA (2025) Long-term International Migration (2024) – official migration estimates (Stocks). Available [here](#):

Migration remained positive until 2019, when a net figure of 3,800 was reported. The following year however (year ending June 2020), which coincided with the UK's withdrawal from the EU, 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 almost 6,000 was recorded for the year ending June 2024.

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.

6.5 International Migration: Countries of Origin

During the full 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](#) (Table 6.4), which show that Poland topped the list with 16,086 registrations, followed by Ireland (15,935), Romania (9,244) and Lithuania (8,672).

Since the withdrawal of the UK from the EU however, inward migration from Europe has fallen sharply, and the [latest figures](#) (2024) show that India, Philippines, Ireland, and Nigeria are now the top four countries of origin for new medical card registrations from outside the UK (see Table 6.3)

Table 6.4 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

Brexit ended freedom of movement for EU citizens, and the change in migration patterns since then has been striking. For example, in the year 2018-19, Poland accounted for 1,057 medical card registrations, compared with 653 from India. Fast forward to 2024, and Polish registrations plummeted to 101, while 3,041 registrations were recorded for Indian applicants (see NISRA, Long-term Migration [inflows] [here](#)). Falls of similar magnitude have been reported for Romanian and Bulgarian citizens, while registrations for Nigerians have risen from 123 in 2018-19 to 957 in 2024

Table 6.5 International Inflows to Northern Ireland, 2024

Nationality	Count
India	3,041
Philippines	1,841
Republic of Ireland	1,377
Nigeria	957
Zimbabwe	556
Pakistan	542
China	364
South Africa	312
Somalia	309
USA	286

Source: BSO, Medical Card Registrations

The same pattern has been found across the UK as a whole. Portes and Springford (2026)¹³ analysed the impact of Brexit on immigration to the UK. They found that by 2024 there had been a reduction of around 785,000 in the number of EU-origin employees, and an increase of about 992,000 in non-EU origin employees. In brief, since Brexit there has been a modest net increase in migration figures, caused mainly by a decline in EU migration and a larger rise in non-EU migration.

6.6 International Migration by Age and Sex

Table 6.6 shows net international migration to Northern Ireland by age band for the full period, 2001 – 2024. The data reveals that most migrants are young, with 88.6 per cent under the age of 35 years.

¹³ Portes, J. and Springford, J. (2026) **The impact of Brexit on Immigration to the UK**. Centre for European Reform, 9 March 2026. Available at : https://www.cer.eu/sites/default/files/JP_JS_brexit_immigration_6.3.26.pdf

Table 6.6 Estimated Net International Migration by Age band, 2001 - 2024

Age Band	Per cent (%)
0 – 17 years	34.5
18 - 24 years	28.1
25 – 34 years	26.0
35 – 44 years	9.5
45 – 54 years	5.9
55 – 64 years	0.2
65 + years	-4.3

Source: NISRA Mid-year Population Estimates (2024) and Long-term International Migration: Official Estimates (2025).

International migration is also balanced in terms of sex: during the period 2001 – 2024, females accounted for 48.2 per cent of international migrants and males 51.8 per cent (Table 6.7).

Table 6.7 Estimated Net International Migration by Sex, 2001 - 2024

Age Band	Sex	Per cent (%)
Female	32,770	48.2
Male	35,179	51.8
Total	67,949	100.0

Source: NISRA Mid-year Population Estimates (2024) and Long-term International Migration: Official Estimates (2025).

6.7 International Net Migration by Local Government District (LGD)

Net international migration has not been uniform across all LGDs. For example, during 2014 – 2024, one LGD (Causeway Coast and Glens) actually experienced a net loss of migrants, while the other ten district councils saw a net gain (Table 6.8). Belfast had the largest net number of international migrants during this period (13,800), followed by Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon (7,500) and Mid Ulster (3,700). Causeway Coast and Glens (-400), Lisburn and Castlereagh (200) and Derry City and Strabane (500) had the fewest number.

Table 6.8 Net International Migration by LGD, 20014 – 2024

LGD	Net International Migration
Belfast	13,814
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon	7,522
Mid Ulster	3,651
Newry, Mourne and Down	3,349
Mid and East Antrim	2,802
Fermanagh & Omagh	1,399
Antrim and Newtownabbey	1,350
Ards and North Down	1,167
Derry City and Strabane	523
Lisburn and Castlereagh	199
Causeway Coast and Glens	-443
Northern Ireland	35,333

Source: NISRA (2025) Long-term International Migration: Official Migration Estimates, Table 1.2

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.

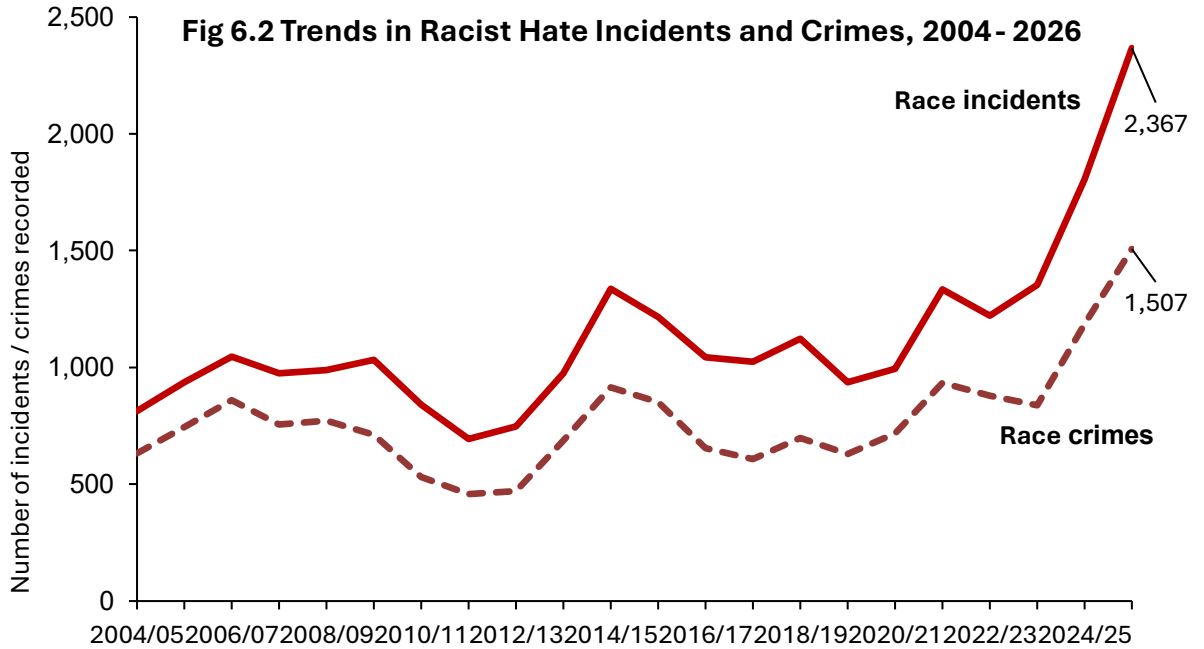
6.8 Hate Crime in Northern Ireland

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. Examples include name-calling or microaggressions. A **racist crime** is a notifiable offence (such as assault or criminal damage) which is perceived by the victim, or any other person, as being motivated by racial prejudice or hate¹⁴. In brief, the primary difference between a racist incident and a racist crime is whether the act constitutes a **criminal offence** under the law. Both are defined by the perception of the victim that the act was motivated by racial hostility or prejudice.

Figure 6.2 and Table 6.9 (overleaf) illustrate trends in racist incidents and crimes for the period 2004 – 2026. The figure shows that the number of racist incidents 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 2,367 in the year ending 31 March 2026. This represents an increase of 561 incidents compared with the previous year, and was the

¹⁴ PSNI (2018) User Guide to Police Recorded Statistics in Northern Ireland, January 2018. Available [here](#):

highest figure recorded since the series began in 2004. Similarly, the number of racist crimes increased from 633 in 2004 to 1,507 in 2025/2026. This is a rise of 320 compared with 2024/25. Again, this is the highest figure ever recorded.



Source: PSNI (2026) Trends in Hate Motivated Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland, 2004/05 to 2025/26. Available [here](#)

Table 6.9 Racist Incidents and Offences, 2004 – 2026

	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

	Racist incidents	Racist crimes
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
2024/25	1,807	1,188
2025/26	2,367	1,507

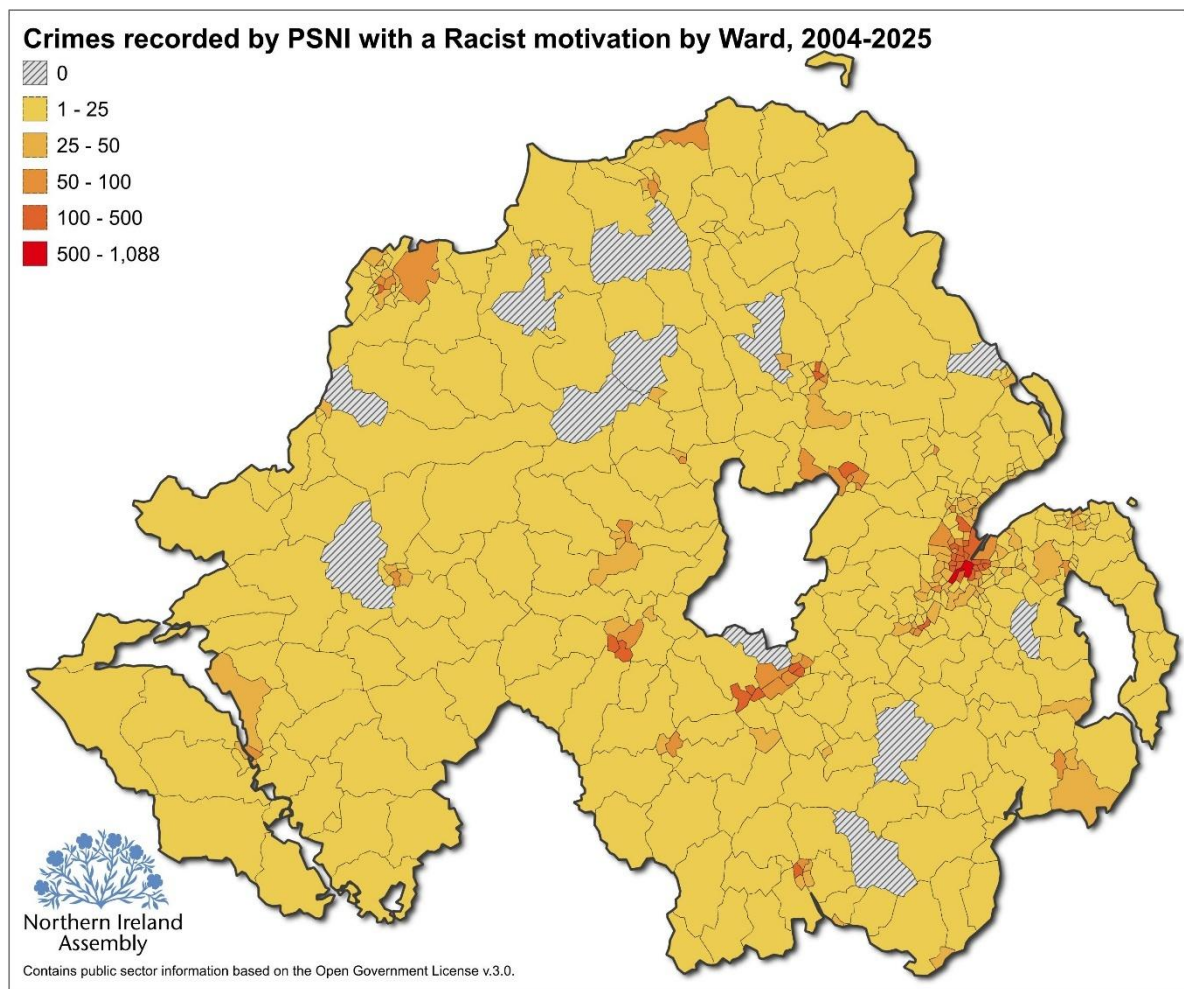
Source: PSNI (2026) Hate Motivations Bulletin, 31 March 2026. Available [here](#)

It is important to note that, since 2016, the number of racist incidents and crimes recorded by the PSNI has exceeded the number of sectarian incidents. In 2025/26, for example, there were 2,367 incidents with a racist motivation, compared with 981 incidents with a sectarian motivation. Similarly, there were 1,507 crimes with a racist motivation compared with 653 crimes with a sectarian motivation¹⁵. 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 associated with only 8 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 motivation¹⁶.

In addition, incidents and crimes with a racist motivation are more widespread in Northern Ireland than is generally realised. Map 6.3 (overleaf) shows the number of racist crimes which were committed in the 462 electoral wards (Ward 2014 geography) in Northern Ireland over the period, 2004 – 2025. In only 12 wards were there no reported incidents during this time (coloured with grey hatching on the map).

¹⁵ PSNI (2026) Trends in Hate Motivated Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland, 2004/05 to 2025/26. Available [here](#)

¹⁶ Using the 2025/26 race incident figures from the PSNI, and revised Census 2021 figures for the BME and Protestant/Catholic populations, then the likelihood of a BME individual experiencing a racist incident is **15 times higher** than the likelihood of a member of the majority (Protestant/Catholic community) experiencing a sectarian incident.

Map 6.3 Crimes with a Racist Motivation by Ward, 2004-25

The General Medical Council (2025) has blamed [hostility towards migrants](#) for the increased exodus of overseas-trained doctors from the UK ¹⁷. In 2024, 4,880 doctors who qualified in another country left the UK, compared with 3,869 the previous year, a rise of 26 per cent. An estimated 42 per cent of the entire medical workforce in the NHS qualified overseas.

7 Asylum Seekers in Northern Ireland

According to [Amnesty International](#) (2025), “An asylum seeker is a person who has left their country and is seeking protection from persecution and serious human rights violations in another country, but who hasn’t yet been legally recognized as a refugee.”

¹⁷ In addition, the Royal College of Nursing (2025) reported [a 55 per cent rise in racist abuse](#) experienced by nurses over the past three years, and has called on Government to stop using anti-migrant rhetoric.

The right to claim asylum is enshrined in international law, notably The Refugee Convention (1951).

It is only possible to claim asylum from within the UK. However, there is no ‘asylum visa’, meaning that people cannot obtain permission to come to the UK solely to claim protection. This is why people often resort to irregular or clandestine means such as travelling by small boat etc ¹⁸.

Northern Ireland has a long history of sheltering asylum seekers and refugees, ranging from the [Kindertransport](#) ¹⁹ in the 1930s to the [Vietnamese Boat People](#) in 1979. In recent years the majority of asylum seekers have come from Africa and the Middle East (see Table 7.1).

Table 7.1 Asylum Seekers in receipt of support in Northern Ireland at 30th September 2025 by Nationality – Top 10 nations.

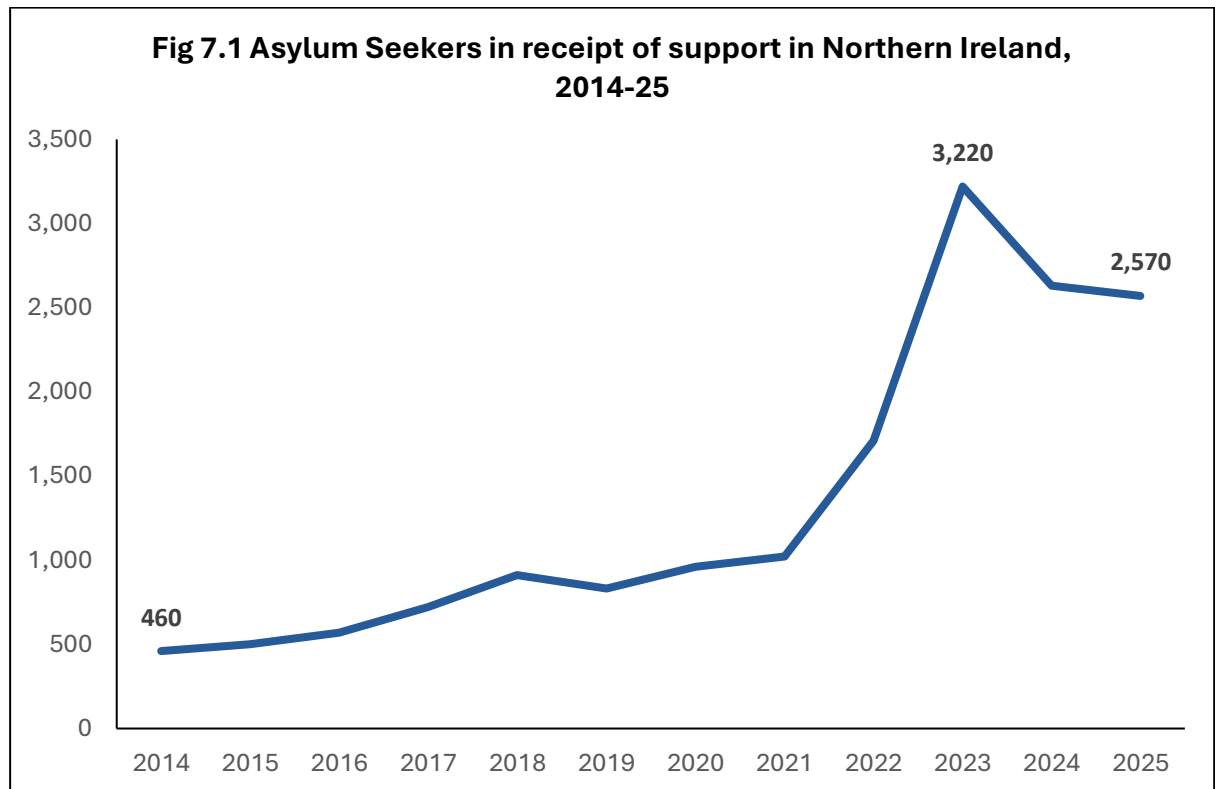
Nationality	Count
Somalia	790
Syria	240
Eritrea	230
Sudan	160
Iran	130
Nigeria	120
Iraq	120
Palestine	70
Jordan	60
Ethiopia	50
Overall Total (22 nationalities)	2,570

Source: NISRA (2025) Long-term International Migration (2024) – official migration estimates (Stocks), Table 4.21. Available [here](#):

¹⁸ There are a small number of ‘safe and legal routes’ whereby people are granted visas **in advance** to come or stay in the UK for humanitarian reasons. In Northern Ireland, these special arrangements apply only to Syrian families, Ukrainians, Afghans and people from Hong Kong. However, most asylum seekers are not covered by these arrangements.

¹⁹ The Kindertransport (“Children’s Transport”) was a rescue effort that saved approximately 10,000 predominantly Jewish children from Nazi-occupied Europe by moving them to Great Britain between 1938 and 1940. Primarily occurring after *Kristallnacht* (November 1938), these unaccompanied children travelled from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia, mostly living with foster families or in hostels. In Northern Ireland, most of the children were accommodated on a farm near Millisle. The farm finally closed in May 1948.

Figure 7.1 shows the number of asylum seekers in receipt of support in Northern Ireland rose from 460 in 2014 to a peak of 3,220 in 2023, before falling back to 2,570 in 2025.



Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Total	460	500	570	720	910	830	960	1,020	1,710	3,220	2,630	2,570

Source: NISRA (2025) Long-term International Migration (2024) – official migration estimates (Stocks), Table 4.20. Available [here](#):

There are two broad types of accommodation for asylum seekers – **contingency** (hotel) accommodation, and **dispersal** (rental) accommodation. At 30 September 2025, 240 (9.3%) out of the 2,570 asylum seekers were staying in hotel accommodation, while 2,240 (87.2%) were living in rented accommodation. A small number – 70 – were in ‘initial accommodation’. Asylum seekers are not permitted to work, and are given a small subsistence allowance based on their living arrangements.

While Northern Ireland is generally perceived to be a welcoming and hospitable region of the UK, hostility in some quarters towards asylum seekers and migrants led to [riots in Ballymena](#) during June 2025.

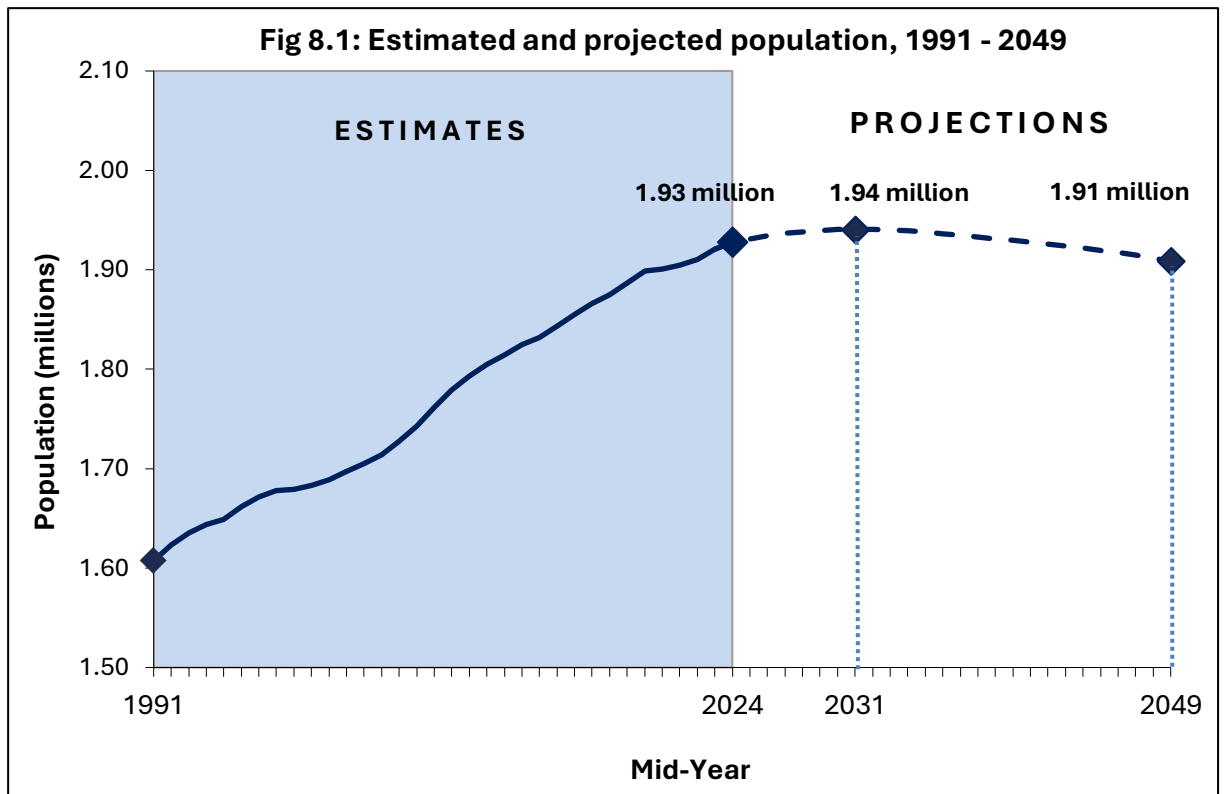
Previous sections have outlined trends in births, deaths and migration – the three components of population change. The final section brings these three components together, and examines how they are likely to influence demographic change over the next two decades.

8 Population Projections

Population projections provide an estimate of the future size and age structure of the population. They are widely used in policy development in areas such as housing, health and social care, pensions, and education. NISRA published the latest 2024-based population projections in April 2026.

Fig 8.1 (overleaf) shows that the population is projected to peak at 1.94 million in 2031, thereafter declining to 1.91 million by 2049. **Deaths** are projected to exceed **births** from 2030 onwards, creating negative natural change (i.e. births minus deaths). This trend has important implications for the size of the population; essentially, it means that population growth will entirely depend upon the level of net **migration**. More explicitly, without increased migration the population of Northern Ireland will continue to fall.

Table 8.1 presents the projected components of population change (natural change and migration) across the four UK nations for the period, 2024 – 2049. It shows that the population of Northern Ireland (-1.0%) and Scotland (-1.3%) [are both projected to fall during this period](#). England is expected to have the largest population increase (5.5%), while the population of Wales will grow modestly (0.3%). The table also reveals that, over the twenty-five year period, there will be negative natural change in all UK jurisdictions (i.e. deaths will exceed births) while [there will be less migration in Northern Ireland](#) than in England, Scotland and Wales.



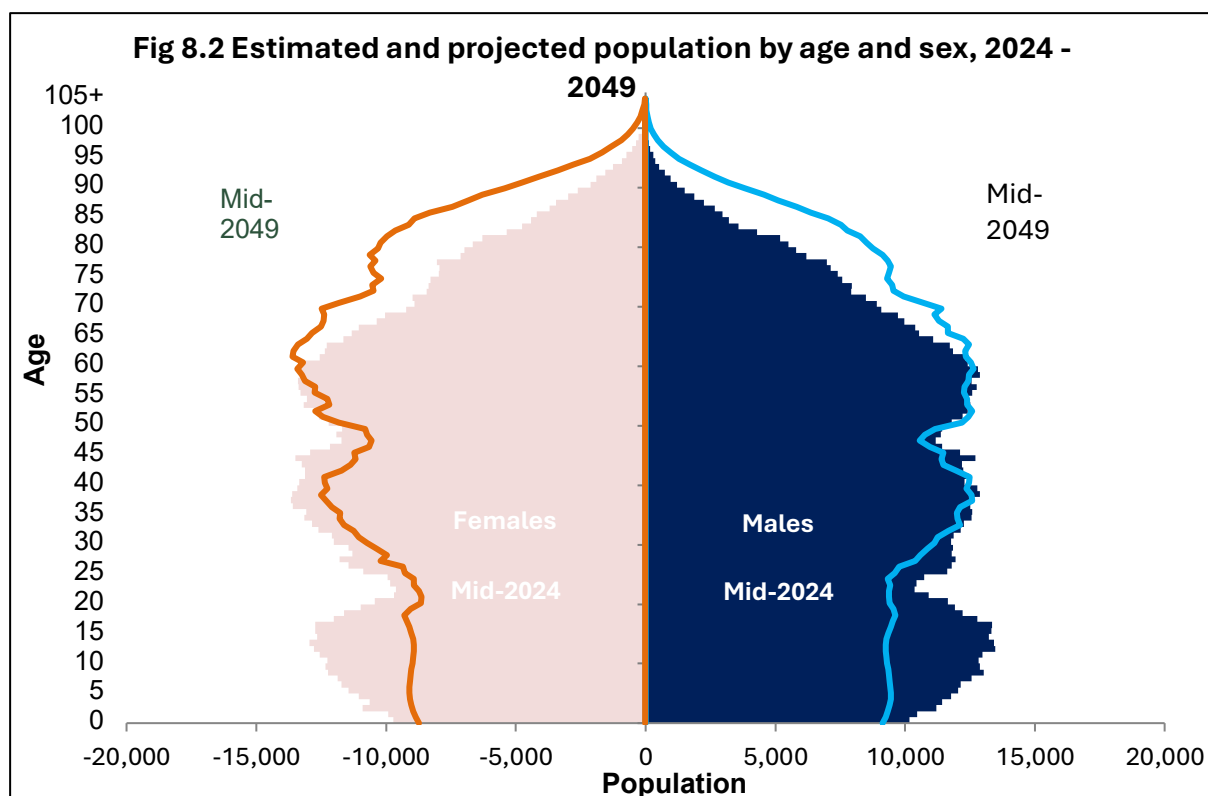
Source: NISRA (2026) 2024-based Population Projections – Statistical Bulletin, Fig 2

Table 8.1 Projected components of Population Change across the UK, 2024 – 2049

Country	Estimated population June 2024	Natural Change	Net Migration	Estimated population June 2049	Population change %
Northern Ireland	1,927,900	-54,200	35,000	1,908,600	-1.0%
England	58,620,100	-1,486,400	4,697,800	61,831,600	5.5%
Scotland	5,546,900	-615,700	543,300	5,474,500	-1.3%
Wales	3,186,600	-347,300	355,900	3,195,200	0.3%

Source: NISRA (2026) 2024-based Population Projections – Statistical Bulletin, Table 2. Available [here](#)

Projections also show that the ageing of the population is set to continue. Fig 8.2 (overleaf) illustrates, via a population pyramid, the projected ageing of the population over a twenty-five year period. The figure shows that population around the older ages (65 and over) is projected to increase significantly, resulting in the shape of the pyramid changing to a more rectangular outline. Further, the ageing of the population can be demonstrated through the **median age**, which is projected to increase from 41.3 years in 2024 to 48.3 years in 2049.



Source: NISRA (2025) 2022-based Population Projections – Statistical Bulletin, Figure 6. Available [here](#)

The proportion of the population in each of the three age bands (children, working age, and older people) is projected to change over the next two decades. Notably, the proportion of children will fall (from 20.0% in 2024 to 15.4% in 2049); the proportion of older people aged 65+ will rise (from 18.1% in 2024 to 26.5% in 2049); and the **proportion of working age adults (16 – 64 years) is expected to fall** – from 61.9 per cent in 2024 to 58.2 per cent in 2049.

The significance of the expected fall in the working age population (the so-called “demographic time-bomb”) lies in the fact that the tax revenues collected from adults in employment is largely used to support public services for dependent children and older people. This includes services such as education, health care and pensions. If, as anticipated, the tax base becomes smaller, at a time when the number of older dependents is becoming larger, this will inevitably lead to greater pressure on a shrinking workforce. Increasing the flow of migrants, who are generally younger than the host population, would be one way of expanding the tax base.

10 Summary and Conclusion

In 1971 the population of Northern Ireland stood at 1,536,000. Fifty years later (2021) it had increased to 1,903,000, a rise of almost a quarter (23.9%). Current projections, however, indicate that this sustained growth has begun to level off, and may even go into reverse from mid-2031, unless birth rates are raised (unlikely) or migration levels increase.

Population change is primarily a function of the interaction between three factors – **fertility** (births), **mortality** (deaths) and **migration**. Birth rates have been declining for decades, and are now below replacement levels, while mortality is rising steadily. Deaths are expected to exceed births from 2030 onwards, and meanwhile, the population is ageing. In 1974, the median (average) age was 28.6 years; fifty years later (2024) it had risen to 40.3 years – a remarkable increase in a relatively short period of time.

In the 1970s, Northern Ireland was an overwhelmingly white monoculture, with negligible inward migration. The direction of travel was away from Northern Ireland, as thousands of people left the Province to escape the violence of the Troubles. Fifty years later, our society has become much more diverse, and people from a minority ethnic background can now be found in every hamlet, village, town and city in Northern Ireland. In some schools, the proportion of Newcomer pupils exceeds 50 per cent.

While not everyone has welcomed our Newcomer population, migrants have made an important contribution to the economic and cultural life of Northern Ireland, including vital public services such as the National Health Service and social care. Their contribution is likely to become even more salient in the coming decades, as the public services required for our ageing population will be primarily funded by a smaller working age cohort.