

This briefing provides an analysis specifically on referrals to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) made in **Northern Ireland** using the disaggregated NRM data which is available from the UK Data Service (UKDS).¹ The NRM is the UK's official system through which victims of modern slavery are identified and supported.

This is the third briefing focused exclusively on cases of NRM data in **Northern Ireland** produced by IOM UK. The briefing focuses on the data from 2023 (January to December), but also uses historical NRM data for context. It provides an analysis of key highlights, ongoing trends, and data gaps identified by IOM UK.

This briefing highlights five key findings from analysis of the data, specific to referrals made in Northern Ireland (see box on right).

462 potential victims of trafficking were referred to the NRM in 2023 in Northern Ireland; a 16% decrease compared to 2022.

Graph 1 shows the number of referrals made to the NRM in Northern Ireland increasing between 2015 and 2022 and then dropping slightly in 2023. In 2023, 462 referrals were made to the NRM in Northern Ireland which is a 16% decrease on the 547 referrals made the previous year (2022). In comparison with the rest of the UK (England, Scotland and Wales) there were 16,524 NRM referrals in 2023. Of the 462 referrals made in Northern Ireland in 2023, 308 were male (67%) and 154 were female (33%) which is a higher percentage of female referrals in comparison with the rest of the UK where 24% of referrals were female.

Overall, in 2023 Northern Ireland made up 2.7% of all NRM referrals in the UK, which is less than 2022 where Northern Ireland made up 3.2% of all UK referrals.

The top three forms of reported exploitation in Northern Ireland in 2023 included 'labour' exploitation with 297 referrals (64%), 'sexual and labour' exploitation with 43 referrals (9%), and 'sexual' exploitation with 32 referrals (7%), while the remaining 90 referrals reported 'other' forms of exploitation.² Of the 297 referrals reporting 'labour' exploitation, 288 (97%) of these cases reported labour exploitation taking place 'overseas' and not 'within the UK'.

NORTHERN IRELAND HIGHLIGHTS

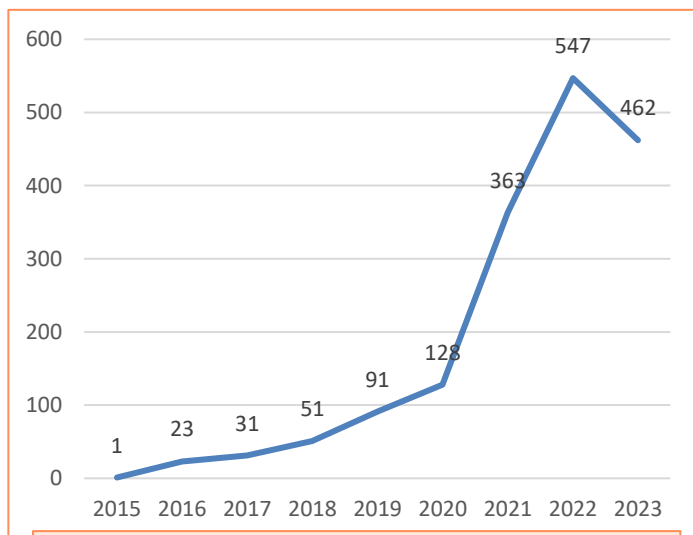
462 potential victims of modern slavery were referred to the NRM in 2023 in Northern Ireland; a 16% decrease compared to 2022.

Two UK nationals were referred to the NRM in Northern Ireland in 2023, the lowest number since 2017. In addition, only two Irish nationals have been referred in Northern Ireland since 2015.

No children were referred to the NRM as potential victims of criminal exploitation in Northern Ireland in 2023, compared to 3,118 in the rest of the UK.

60% of reasonable grounds decisions were negative for potential victims reporting exploitation 'within the UK' or 'within the UK and overseas' in 2023 in NI, compared with 41% of those reporting exploitation 'overseas' only.

564 days was the median wait time to receive a conclusive grounds decision, with one individual waiting over 3000 days (over eight years) to receive a positive CG decision in 2023.



Graph 1: Number of NRM referrals in Northern Ireland per year (2015 – 2023).

HOW NRM DECISION-MAKING OPERATED IN 2023

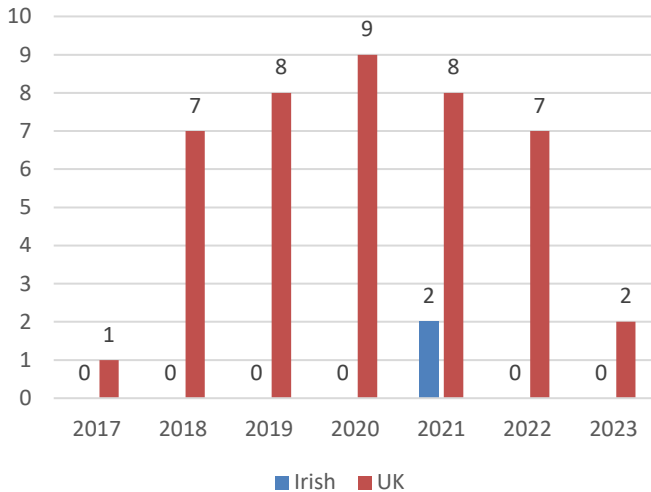
The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) has a two-stage decision-making process for identifying potential victims of modern slavery (a term that includes any form of human trafficking, slavery, servitude or forced labour). The first stage is the Reasonable Grounds (RG) decision, which should be made within five working days of a potential victim being referred to the NRM. The RG decision is a "decision taken by the competent authorities as to whether the decision maker agrees there are reasonable grounds to believe, based on all available general and specific evidence but falling short of conclusive proof, that a person is a victim of modern slavery." A positive RG decision entitles a person to a reflection period of at least 30 days to receive specialist support and assistance. The second stage Conclusive Grounds (CG) decision should be made no sooner than 45 days after the RG decision and is made on the 'balance of probabilities' threshold. Both the RG and CG determinations are made by the Single Competent Authority (SCA) and Immigration Enforcement Competent Authority (IECA) which both sit within the Home Office. Further information on the NRM is available [here](#).

1 – Home Office, Modern Slavery Research & Analysis. (2024). National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify Statistics, 2014-2023. [data collection]. 11th Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 8910, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-8910-11>

2 – Other forms of exploitation include, 'criminal', 'domestic', 'labour & criminal', 'labour & domestic', 'not specified or unknown', 'sexual & domestic', 'sexual, labour & criminal' or 'sexual, labour & domestic' exploitation.

TWO UK nationals were referred to the NRM in Northern Ireland in 2023, the lowest number since 2017. In addition, only two Irish nationals have been referred in Northern Ireland since 2015.

In 2023 in Northern Ireland, just two UK nationals were identified as potential victims of modern slavery and referred to the NRM. This is the lowest number of UK nationals identified and referred to the NRM since 2017 when one UK national was referred, as illustrated in Graph 2.



Graph 2: Number of UK and Irish nationals referred to the NRM in Northern Ireland (2017 – 2023).

No Irish nationals were identified as potential victims in Northern Ireland in 2023 and only two Irish nationals have been referred to the NRM in Northern Ireland since 2015, which is surprising given the proximity to Ireland, the Common Travel Area (CTA) and ability for individuals from Northern Ireland to have both Irish and UK citizenship.³ Published NRM statistics record NRM referrals since 2015, however we know from a report by the former Anti-Slavery Commissioner that [five Irish nationals were referred to the NRM in 2013](#) with others potentially referred in earlier years and not recorded in published statistics.⁴

The reason this is important to highlight is that in Northern Ireland in 2023, UK and Irish nationals made up 0.4% of NRM referrals. Foreign nationals made up the remaining 99.6% of referrals, with the top three nationalities being Eritrean (165 referrals, 37%), Somali (119 referrals, 26%) and Sudanese (45

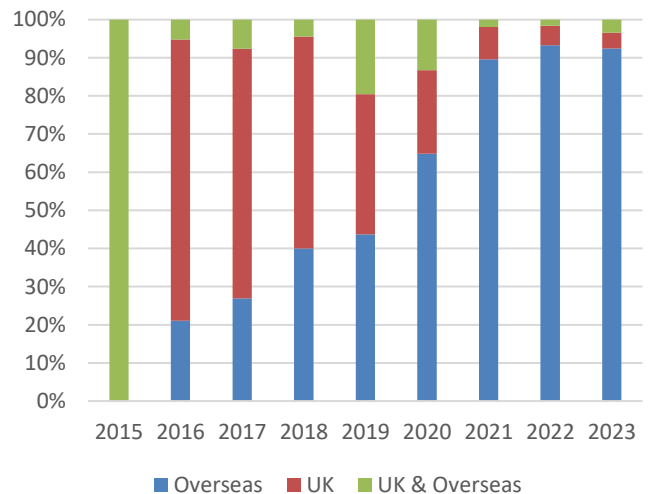
HOW FIRST RESPONDERS OPERATE

First responders can use the NRM to report cases of modern slavery and human trafficking and refer potential victims for support and protection. First responders work for designated organisations within government and civil society and help identify and support potential victims of modern slavery and human trafficking. Authorised 'first responder' organisations can submit NRM forms to the competent authorities.

referrals, 10%). Given that trafficking can be internal as well as international, involving adults or children who are moved and exploited within their own country, this figure is particularly low. By comparison, British nationals made up 26% of referrals across the rest of the UK in 2023, suggesting that cases of internal trafficking are more frequently detected and identified in England, Wales and Scotland compared to Northern Ireland.

A related trend in Northern Ireland is that most individuals referred to the NRM report exploitation taking place 'overseas', which made up 92% of all referrals in 2023. In Northern Ireland in 2023, 35 people referred to the NRM reported exploitation taking place 'within the UK' or 'within the UK and overseas' which is the lowest number since 2017. This trend can also be observed in Graph 3 which shows an increase over time in the percentage of people referred to the NRM in Northern Ireland reporting exploitation 'overseas'.

The underrepresentation of UK and Irish nationals in the NRM data for Northern Ireland is particularly notable and could suggest a lack of awareness amongst stakeholders that UK and Irish nationals can also be victims of modern slavery, and limited knowledge of the indicators to look out for in relation to identifying exploitation among this population.



Graph 3: Location of claimed exploitation of NRM referrals in Northern Ireland (2015 – 2022) as a percentage of overall referrals.

No children were referred to the NRM as potential victims of criminal exploitation in Northern Ireland in 2023, compared to 3,118 in the rest of the UK.

In 2023, there were no children referred to the NRM in Northern Ireland as potential victims of criminal exploitation, often referred to as child criminal exploitation (CCE).

³ – Chisholm A, Burland P, Dew J, Stephenson T, (2023) A Study on Human Trafficking between Ireland and Northern Ireland. International Organization for Migration, London. Available at: <https://unitedkingdom.iom.int/news/iom-releases-report-human-trafficking-between-northern-ireland-and-ireland#:~:text=The%20number%20of%20formally%20identified,on%20the%20island%20of%20Ireland>.

⁴ – County lines is a subset of criminal exploitation. More information can be found here - <https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/what-we-do/crime-threats/drug-trafficking/county-lines>

This is in stark comparison to 2,825 children who were identified as potential victims of criminal exploitation in England alone in 2023, 227 identified in Wales and 66 in Scotland. There have only been three children (all male) referred to the NRM in Northern Ireland reporting criminal exploitation (CCE) since records began in 2015 and no UK national children have ever been referred reporting this form of exploitation in Northern Ireland.

In addition, there have only been 14 UK national children referred to the NRM in Northern Ireland since 2015 in comparison with 16,691 identified in England, 1,257 in Wales and 214 in Scotland. All UK children identified in Northern Ireland are female, with 12 referred to the NRM reporting sexual exploitation and two reporting labour exploitation.

In 2023, 1,559 county lines cases were flagged throughout the UK of which 1,272 were referrals for children. [County lines](#) is a subset of criminal exploitation and a term used to describe drug gangs or organised crime groups (OCGs) in large cities expanding to reach small towns with OCGs often exploiting vulnerable individuals to transport substances.⁴ In contrast, there have been two county lines cases flagged in Northern Ireland since 2015.

The phenomenon of county lines, predominantly in England, does not appear to be detected or identified as yet in Northern Ireland and therefore such cases are noticeably absent in NRM data for Northern Ireland.⁵

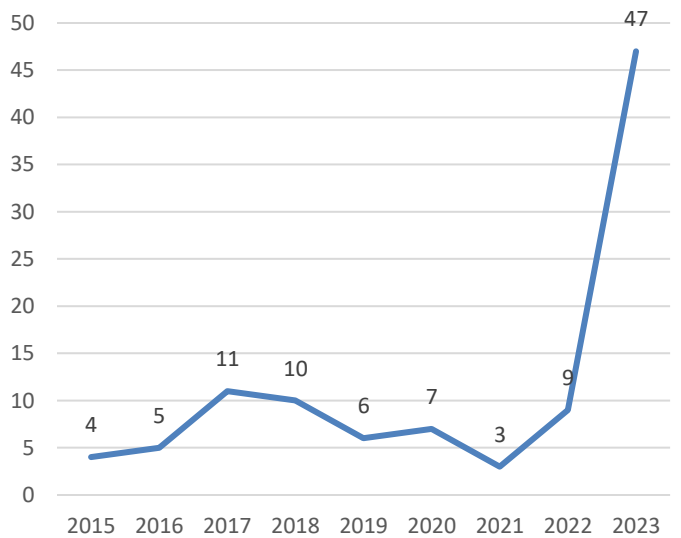
60% of reasonable grounds decisions were negative for potential victims reporting exploitation ‘within the UK’ or ‘within the UK and overseas’ in 2023 in NI, compared with 41% of those reporting exploitation ‘overseas’ only.

In Northern Ireland, 402 reasonable grounds (RG) decisions were made in 2023. Of this number, 369 RG cases had reported exploitation ‘overseas’ with 59% of this cohort receiving a positive decision, while 41% received a negative decision.

However, of the 33 RG decisions that reported exploitation ‘within the UK’ or ‘within the UK and overseas’, only 40% received a positive decision and 60% received a negative decision. This is considerably lower than the UK average of 55% receiving a positive RG decision. It is unknown as to why this is the case in Northern Ireland.

In 2023, the UKDS included the waiting time for reasonable grounds decision per individual referred. Graph 4 shows the

average waiting time for RG decisions in Northern Ireland with a sudden increase in 2023 to 47 days, which is considerably longer than the aim stated in the NRM guidance for competent authorities to make a RG decision within five working days wherever possible.⁶ This increase may have been as a result of changes to how RG decisions are made which were introduced in January 2023, with the Home Office acknowledging the wait time increase in RG decision making “is likely because the change in guidance required decision makers to have regard to objective factors, and typically a positive decision should not have been issued without supporting evidence or information in addition to a potential victim’s account”.⁷



Graph 4: Average waiting time in days to receive a reasonable grounds (RG) decisions in Northern Ireland (2015-2023).

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the average wait time for RG decisions made in Northern Ireland is 5 days longer than average wait time made across the rest of the UK which is 42 days.

Further changes to RG decision making were introduced in response to a [legal challenge against the January guidance](#) taking effect in June 2023. Updates to the [Modern Slavery Act Statutory Guidance \(MSASG\)](#) on RG decision making now clarifies, “A decision maker is entitled to consider all forms of evidence in reaching their conclusion – this is not restricted to objective evidence to prove or disprove an account.”

Northern Ireland had the highest average waiting time throughout the UK for RG decisions in 2023.

5 – Crimestoppers heat map revealing county lines hotspots - <https://crimestoppers-uk.org/news-campaigns/news/2023/jul/new-drugs-heat-map-reveals-county-lines-hotspots-as-we-launch-warning-over-drug-gang-exploitation>

6 - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/human-trafficking-victims-referral-and-assessment-forms/guidance-on-the-national-referral-mechanism-for-potential-adult-victims-of-modern-slavery-england-and-wales>

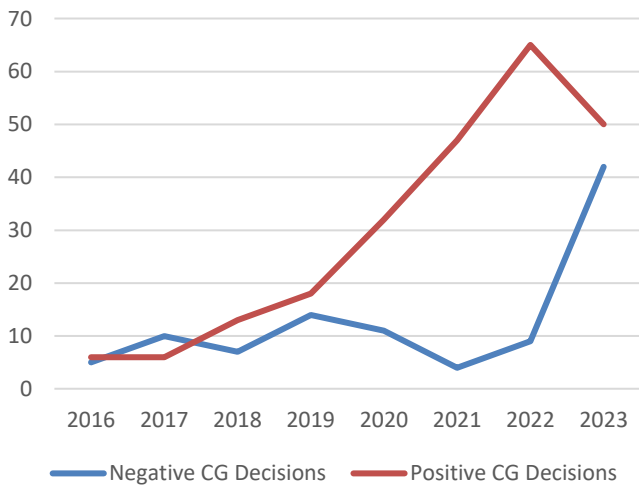
7 - <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/modern-slavery-nrm-and-dtn-statistics-end-of-year-summary-2023/modern-slavery-national-referral-mechanism-and-duty-to-notify-statistics-uk-end-of-year-summary-2023>

564 days was the median wait time to receive a conclusive grounds decision in Northern Ireland, with one individual waiting over 3,000 days (over eight years) to receive a positive CG decision.

In Northern Ireland 92 conclusive grounds (CG) decisions were made in 2023. This is the highest number of CG decisions made in one year since records began in 2015 and is consistent with the record number of CG decisions made in one year for the whole of the UK. It is interesting to note that in Northern Ireland only one CG decision was made in Quarter two of 2023 and 59 decisions made in Quarter four of 2023.

Overall, 54% of CG decisions were positive in 2023. Graph 5 illustrates the spike in negative CG decisions in 2023 in comparison with previous years and the corresponding drop in positive decisions.

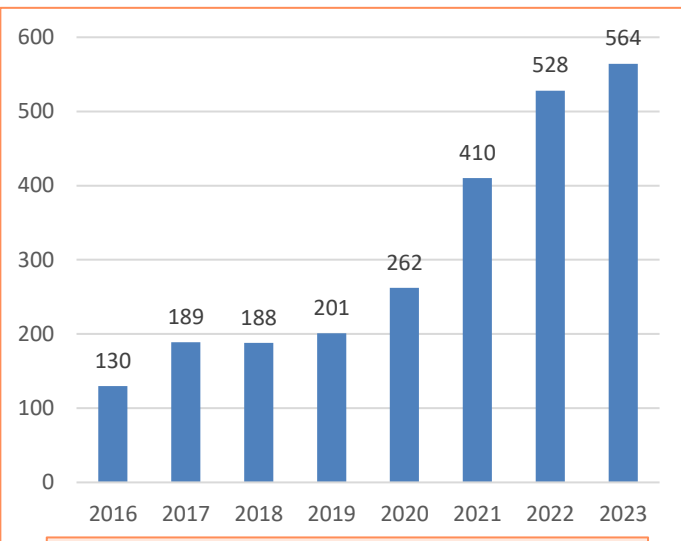
Whilst there were only 21 CG decisions for those referred to the NRM reporting exploitation 'within the UK' or 'within the UK and overseas', and only six cases (29%) of this cohort



Graph 5: Positive and Negative CG decisions in Northern Ireland 2016 – 2023.

received a positive CG decision. In comparison to those reporting exploitation 'overseas', of the 71 cases who received a CG decision, 62% received a positive CG decision.

The median waiting time between a positive RG decision and CG decision for cases referred in Northern Ireland was 564 days, the highest ever median waiting time for CG decisions. This included one individual referred in 2015 but had to wait over 3,000 days (over eight years) to receive a positive CG decision in 2023 and be formally recognised as a victim of modern slavery and human trafficking. Graph 6 shows the yearly median waiting time for CG decisions in Northern Ireland from 2016 – 2023 and how this has been on an upward trend since 2019 with significant increases in 2021 and 2022.



Graph 6: Average waiting time in days to receive a conclusive grounds (CG) decision in Northern Ireland (2016-2023).

ABOUT IOM – UN Migration

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IOM works to help ensure the orderly and humane management of migration to promote international cooperation on migration issues, to assist in the search for practical solutions to migration problems and to provide humanitarian assistance to migrants in need, including refugees and internally displaced people.

The IOM Country Office in the UK (IOM UK) is one of over 150 country offices, promoting cooperation and dialogue on migration issues. (See www.unitedkingdom.iom.int for more information).

To contact IOM UK about this briefing, please email achisholm@iom.int.