

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 fourth briefing focused exclusively on NRM data in Northern Ireland produced by IOM UK. The briefing focuses on data from 2024 (January to June), 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 four key findings from analysis of the data, specific to referrals made in Northern Ireland (see box on right).

There was an 80% increase in the number of people reporting exploitation as children in Northern Ireland in the first half of 2024, compared to the same period in 2023.

Between January and June 2024, there was an 80% increase in the number of people referred to the NRM reporting exploitation as children (a child at the time of reported exploitation) in Northern Ireland compared to the same period in 2023, and more than any previous year. In the first half of 2024, 92 people were referred to the NRM reporting exploitation as a child, constituting 32% of all 289 referrals, compared to 51 in the same period in 2023. Twice as many males were referred to the NRM in 2024 (60), compared to the first half of 2023 (30).

The nationality referred varies among 16 countries of origin, however the top three include Somali (35 referrals), Eritrean (26 referrals) and Sudanese (8 referrals). Only four people (4%) referred in the first half of 2024, reported exploitation taking place 'within the UK' or 'within the UK and overseas'. The remaining 88 reported exploitation taking place 'overseas'.

Of these, 54% (50 referrals) were referred by Home Office UK Visa's and Immigration, suggesting that indicators of trafficking or modern slavery were identified during an immigration process. In addition to Local Authorities and UKIE, the majority of other people were referred by NGO's, including Migrant Help (20), Barnardo's (7), Belfast and Lisburn

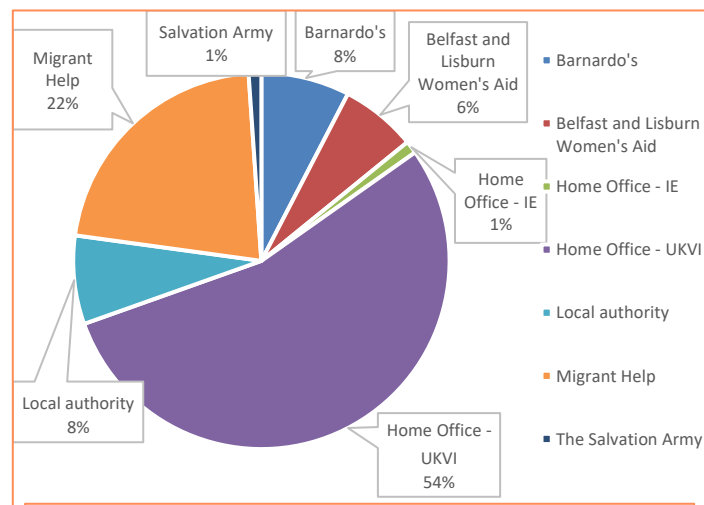
NORTHERN IRELAND HIGHLIGHTS

There was an 80% increase in the number of people reporting exploitation as children in Northern Ireland in the first half of 2024, compared to the same period in 2023.

4% of NRM referrals in the first half of 2024 in Northern Ireland reported exploitation taking place in the UK, the lowest since records began, while 45% of referrals reported exploitation taking place in Libya.

58% of all positive Reasonable Grounds decisions in Northern Ireland since 2015 are still waiting for a Conclusive Grounds decision.

234 conclusive grounds decisions were made in the first half of 2024 for cases referred in Northern Ireland, more than any previous full year combined.



Graph 1: Percentage of child NRM referrals among first responders in Northern Ireland, between January and June 2024.

Women's Aid (6) and the Salvation Army (1), indicating the important role these organisations play in identifying potential cases of human trafficking and modern slavery among children. Despite the increase in the number of cases of children referred to the NRM in Northern Ireland in the first half of 2024, 86% (79) of these were over 18 years old at the age of referral and were reporting their exploitation taking place as a child.

HOW NRM DECISION-MAKING OPERATES IN 2024

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 5 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."¹ A positive RG 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](#).

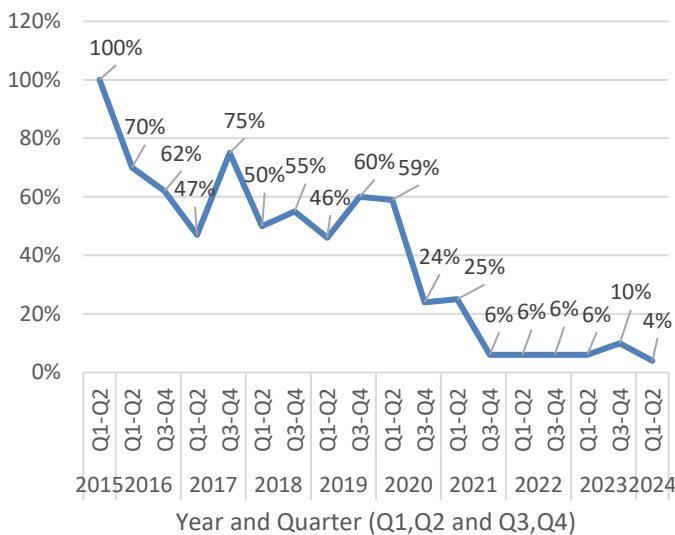
¹ – Home Office, Modern Slavery Research & Analysis. (2024). National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify Statistics, 2014-2024. [data collection]. 13th Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 8910, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-8910-13>

The majority of these referrals reported ‘Labour’ exploitation (49 referrals or 53%), followed by ‘Labour & Domestic’ exploitation (10 referrals or 11%) and ‘Sexual, Labour & Domestic’ exploitation (10 referrals or 11%). This trend is similar to the same period in 2023, where ‘Labour’ exploitation was the highest reported form of exploitation among children.

In the first half of 2024, of the 60 male referrals, 45 (75%) reported ‘Labour’ exploitation, and among female referrals, ‘Sexual, Labour & Domestic’ was the most reported form of exploitation with 30% of referrals.

4% of NRM referrals in the first half of 2024 in Northern Ireland reported exploitation taking place in the UK, the lowest since records began, while 45% of referrals reported exploitation taking place in Libya

In the first half of 2024, there were 289 NRM referrals made in Northern Ireland, an increase on the same period in 2023 when 235 individuals were referred. Of these, only 4% (13 referrals), reported exploitation taking place ‘within the UK’ or ‘within the UK and overseas’. This is the lowest proportion of referrals for the same period of any year since records began and reflects an overall downward trend as shown in Graph 2.



Graph 2: Percentage of NRM referrals per half year in Northern Ireland reporting exploitation taking place in the UK.

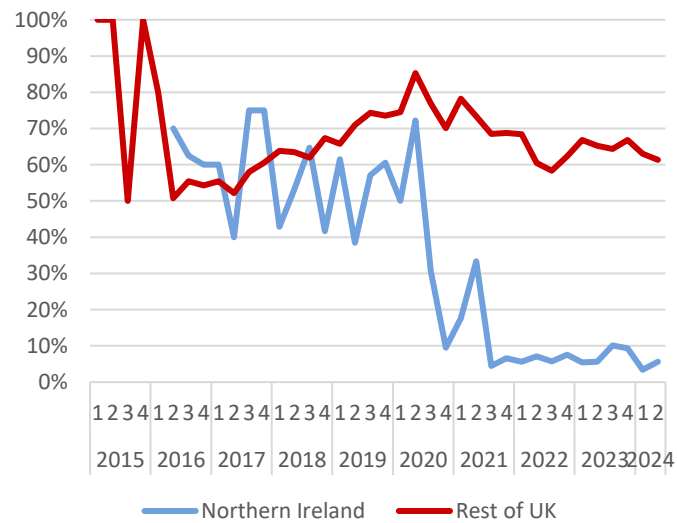
Northern Ireland has a significantly lower proportion of NRM referrals reporting exploitation in the UK compared to the rest of the UK (England, Scotland and Wales) where 62% of all NRM referrals reported exploitation in the UK in the first half of 2024, as seen in Graph 3. As a breakdown, this included 87% of referrals in Wales, 60% in Scotland and 61% in

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.

England. The differences observed in Northern Ireland are greatly impacted by the extremely low numbers of UK and Irish nationals referred to the NRM compared to large numbers of UK nationals referred across the rest of the UK. Since records began, just 44 UK nationals have been referred to the NRM in Northern Ireland and only 1 Irish national. In the first half of 2024 alone, there were 2,027 UK nationals referred in England, 163 in Wales and 41 in Scotland who reported being exploited almost exclusively in the UK, but just two UK nationals in Northern Ireland.

The lack of identification of potential victims who may still be in a situation of exploitation also suggests a lack of knowledge or understanding of the signs to identify modern slavery and human trafficking in Northern Ireland. This lack of identification was highlighted as a prioritized recommendation in the 2024 US State Department’s Trafficking in Persons Report to, “Increase proactive victim identification of individuals whose exploitation occurs in Northern Ireland”.²



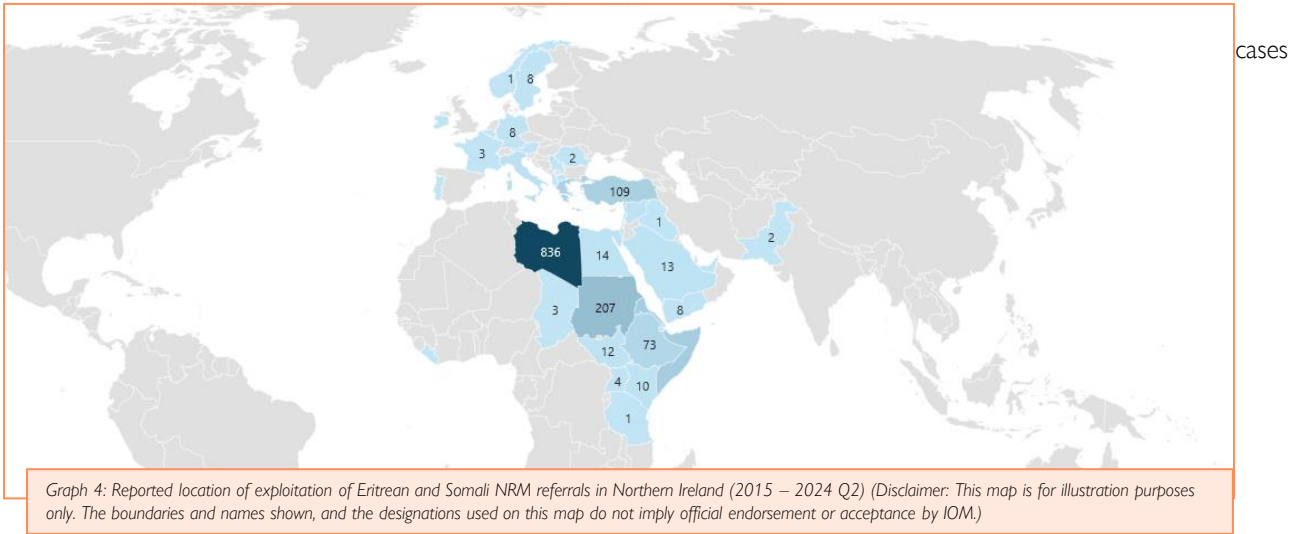
Graph 3: Percentage (%) of NRM referrals in Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, reporting exploitation taking place ‘within the UK’ as a proportion of overall NRM referrals.

For the first time, the latest data release for the NRM includes reported country(s) of exploitation. Among the cases referred in Northern Ireland are people who were reported as having been exploited in six different countries before they arrived with Libya being the most commonly reported country (45% of all referrals). In comparison, 12% of all referrals in the first half of 2024 in the rest of the UK reported exploitation taking place in Libya.³

In total, 65% of all NRM referrals in the first half of 2024 in Northern Ireland were specifically of Eritrean and Somali nationality, of which 99% were exploited overseas.

2 – US State Department Trafficking in Persons Report 2024: United Kingdom, available at: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-trafficking-in-persons-report/united-kingdom/>

3 - Both the NRM and legislation in Northern Ireland provide support to potential victims of modern slavery where their exploitation has occurred outside of the UK (Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015)



Similarly, since records began in 2015, 65% (1,279) of all 1,972 NRM referrals in Northern Ireland are of Eritrean and Somali nationality. Northern Ireland therefore has 22% of all Eritrean and Somali NRM referrals across the UK since 2015, despite only having 2% of total UK NRM referrals.

Of the 188 Eritrean and Somali referrals in Northern Ireland in 2024, 63% (118 referrals) reported exploitation taking place in Libya at some point on their journey to Northern Ireland.³ This is similar to the total number of referrals from Eritrea and Somalia in Northern Ireland since 2015 (836) where 65% have reported exploitation taking place in Libya at some point on their journey (as shown in Graph 4).

Other countries of reported exploitation for these two nationalities included Sudan (16%), Somalia (10%), Eritrea (9%) and Turkey (9%).

Once in Northern Ireland, Eritrean and Somali nationals are mainly being referred to the NRM by UKVI (84% since 2016), suggesting that indicators of trafficking are being detected as part of an immigration process.

A trend that emerges from the data indicates that Eritrean and Somali nationals are being exploited on route to Northern Ireland, primarily in Libya before being identified through an immigration process and referred to the NRM. It is still unclear why or how this comparatively large proportion of two specific nationalities travel to Northern Ireland.

58% of all Reasonable Grounds decisions in Northern Ireland since 2015 are still waiting for a Conclusive Grounds decision.

Since records began in 2015, 1,550 people referred to the NRM have received a positive Reasonable Grounds (RG) decision in Northern Ireland, however 58% (906) of these people are still waiting for a Conclusive Grounds decision as of 4th July 2024. Graph 5 shows the number of people with a “current decision status” recorded as “positive RG decision” who are awaiting a CG decision by the year which they were

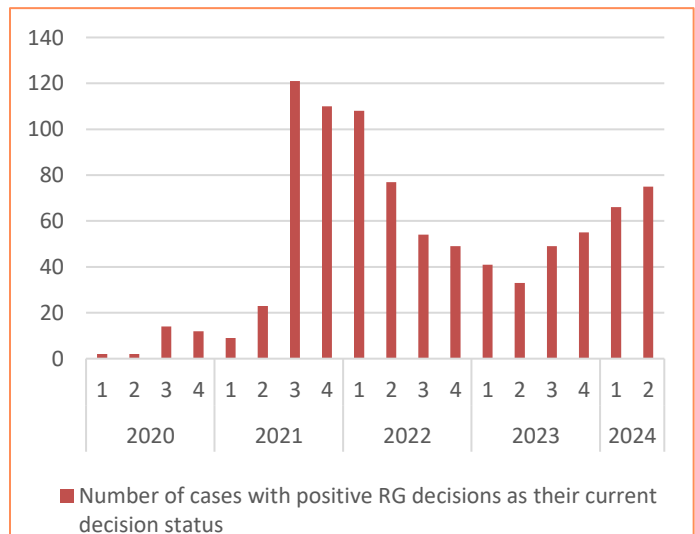
4 – Reported exploitation can occur in multiple countries per NRM referral.

As of 4th July 2024, there were still 246 people who received a positive RG decision in 2021 and 288 individuals who received a positive RG decision in 2022 and who are still awaiting a CG decision.

Despite the increase in CG decisions in the first half of 2024, it would require approximately 23 months to clear the backlog of cases of people waiting for a CG decision if the number of CGs being made continued at the same record high rate as in the first half of 2024.

The median waiting time for CG decisions for NRM referrals made in Northern Ireland has fallen from 564 to 483 days in the first half of 2024 but there are hundreds of people still waiting for a positive CG decision who have already waited double the median waiting time for CG decisions made in the first half of 2024 in Northern Ireland.

It is not clear how historic cases are managed alongside recent referrals, but efforts should be made to make decisions for those who have waited the longest as quickly as possible.



Graph 5: Number of cases with a “current decision status” recorded as “positive RG decision” by year of referral, and who are still awaiting a CG decision.

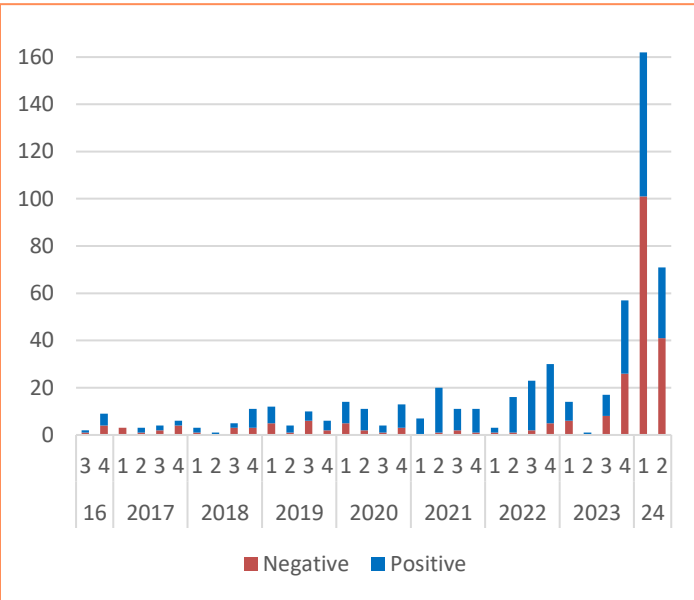
234 Conclusive Grounds decisions were made in the first half of 2024 for cases referred in Northern Ireland, more than any other previous full year combined.

In total, 234 conclusive grounds (CG) decisions were made in the first half of 2024 which is higher than any previous full year, and 263% higher than the annual figure for 2023 when 89 CG decisions were made. Of these decisions, 65% were for male referrals while 35% were made for female referrals, a similar trend seen in previous years.

Graph 6 illustrates the increase in CG decision-making at the start of 2024, including the significant increase in the proportion of negative decisions.

In the first half of 2024, 142 CG decisions were negative, while 91 CG decisions were positive. In comparison with previous years, the number of negative CG decisions is significantly higher (388% increase on 2023). This is the first time the number of negative CG decisions is higher than positive decisions since 2017, as seen in Graph 6.

The Home Office statistical bulletins on NRM data have explained that the rate of positive Reasonable Grounds (RG) decisions fell due to policy changes in how those decisions are made but there have been no such changes to how CG decisions are made, and the reason for a large increase in negative decisions is unclear. IOM will continue to monitor outcomes of CG decisions for referrals made in Northern Ireland.



Graph 6: Total number of Conclusive Grounds (CG) decisions per quarter 2015 – 2024 (Q2)

ABOUT IOM – UN Migration

Founded in 1951, IOM is the leading inter-governmental organization in the field of migration. With 175 member states and presence in over 180 countries, IOM as the UN Migration Agency is committed to the principle that humane and orderly migration benefits migrants and society.

The organization works with its partners in the international community to assist in meeting the operational challenges of migration, advance understanding of migration issues, encourage social and economic development through migration and to uphold the well-being and human rights of all migrants.

In the UK, IOM provides policy advice and operational support to ensure migration is well managed. Programmatic work includes resettlement and family reunion, immigration advice for vulnerable migrants and support to victims of modern slavery. (See www.unitedkingdom.iom.int for more information).

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