

Understanding Migrant Destitution in Northern Ireland

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Authors: Lucy Leon & Jacqui Broadhead

Key Points

- COMPAS' [Understanding Migrant Destitution in the UK](#) study explores local statutory provision across the UK for vulnerable people with 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF), mapping the scale and profile of people receiving social care support across all four UK nations.
- In comparison to England and Scotland, **the data quality on this topic is particularly poor in Northern Ireland, with health and social care trusts struggling to provide accurate data on the numbers of people with NRPF receiving support.**
- Health and social care trusts in Northern Ireland and local authorities in Great Britain provide a '**parallel welfare safety net**' (Price & Spencer, 2015) for vulnerable people excluded from accessing mainstream benefits due to their immigration status, however **this parallel welfare system does not receive any central UK government support and is increasingly dysfunctional**, unable to provide adequate support for the increasing numbers of people facing destitution.
- The [growing numbers](#) of people subject to the NRPF visa condition across the UK have more than doubled from 1.48 million people in 2020 to 3.6 million people in 2024. With growing levels of destitution across the UK, **we cannot hope to tackle wider strategic priorities including reducing homelessness, ending child poverty and tackling domestic violence and abuse without considering how vulnerable people are impacted by the NRPF policy.**
- There are wide calls from [local government](#), [cross-party parliamentary committees](#) and people with lived experience for a significant reform of the NRPF policy, including a call to end the use of the NRPF condition. In the meantime, there needs to be significant improvements to fix a patchy and dysfunctional local safety net, including providing central government funding to social care departments, developing local leadership to evidence the need and tackle migrant destitution, and the importance of listening to and including migrant voices when designing services, building on the learning of the Windrush Lessons Learned review.

Background

- 'No Recourse to Public Funds' (NRPF) is a UK immigration condition prohibiting access to the welfare safety net, including benefits and housing assistance. **Around 3.6 million people in the UK held visas with the NRPF condition in 2024** ([House of Commons Library, 2025](#)), over double the number of people in 2020 ([Migration Observatory, 2023](#)). In addition to this number, people with an irregular immigration status, estimated to be between 594,000 – 745,000 people ([Kierans & Vargas-Silva, 2024](#)), also have NRPF by default.
- The NRPF policy impacts both people with legal status, including European nationals with pre-settled status, [student visa holders](#), health and care worker visa holders, [families on the 10-year route to settlement](#) and people with an irregular status including European nationals who missed the EU Settlement Scheme deadline, visa overstayers and undocumented people.

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- For certain groups of vulnerable people facing destitution, **local authorities have a legal duty to provide accommodation and/or subsistence, effectively providing a de facto 'parallel welfare safety net'** ([Price & Spencer, 2015](#)). Northern Ireland is unique in the UK, in that responsibility sits with Health and Social Care Trusts, rather than with local authority social work teams.

Research findings

- In 2021, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People published [research](#) identifying the paucity of data on the numbers of children and families impacted by NRPF in Northern Ireland and urgently called on the NI Government to undertake work to identify the numbers and publish the data. In 2023, our **data collection activity found that the data quality on NRPF in Northern Ireland was still particularly poor** in comparison to Scotland and England, with none of the NI health and social care trusts able to provide the majority of the data requested on the number of people with NRPF receiving support in 2021/22. Three of the five trusts were only able to provide patchy and limited data and two trusts were unable to provide any data. Yet data published by the Housing Executive and the Department for Communities, including the [Street Needs Audit 2023](#) and the [Northern Ireland Homeless Bulletin](#) indicate that other NI statutory bodies are collecting data on the number of migrant homeless people seeking support. Combining cross-governmental datasets could inform a more comprehensive understanding of the vulnerable migrant population facing destitution in Northern Ireland.
- **The dearth of data collected and reported by NI health and social care trusts means we cannot accurately measure and evidence the level of need and provision for vulnerable people with NRPF in Northern Ireland, or of the levels of costs incurred in supporting this group. Whilst some trusts were able to provide some limited data, they were conscious that the data itself was not representative of the extent of need and trust provision:**

"I personally think there's a lot more that we are probably supporting at the moment that we can't report on because we're not capturing it and we're not actually aware of it. Social workers haven't been advised or given any training on [supporting and recording NRPF cases] so we have a bit of a skewed picture of who we're supporting and how long we're supporting them."(Health & Social Care Trust, Northern Ireland)
- **The number of people seeking and receiving support from trusts is also likely to be only the tip of the iceberg of the level of need.** People may be too fearful to present in case of potential repercussions on their immigration status, and others may not meet the threshold or face robust gatekeeping from social care teams, remaining locked out of all welfare safety nets. A 2017 [study](#) explored the level of destitution among refused asylum seekers in Northern Ireland, highlighting that only a third of survey respondents who were eligible for social services' support actually approached social services for assistance (NICRAS, 2017). Instead, as our findings show, vulnerable people with NRPF may often choose to rely on faith and community groups and charities, masking the true extent of need and only requesting support from social services once they have exhausted all options.
- In line with social care teams across the UK, both Health and Social Care Trust staff and third sector organisations observed **a rise in the number of destitute vulnerable people with NRPF needing support in 2021/22, including a rise in European nationals post Brexit**. One health and social care trust reported EEA nationals representing 75% of the NRPF cases they supported in 2021/22.
- The pandemic saw a wider visibility for understanding and tackling migrant destitution, with public health being prioritised over migration governance. **Some pockets of good practice emerged across the UK as some social care teams and housing departments have sought to tailor their approach to provide** [early intervention models](#), [alternative housing](#), [increase subsistence payments](#) and [commission immigration legal advice](#) to support residents with regularising their status to be able to access mainstream benefits.
- Unlike in Scotland and Wales, **neither Northern Ireland nor England provide statutory guidance for local statutory agencies on assessing and supporting vulnerable people with NRPF facing destitution**. Both trust staff and local stakeholders in Northern Ireland raised concerns around the lack of clarity in policy and practice around statutory referral pathways and legal sign-off for decision-making on NRPF cases. As a result, the responsibility of decision-making sometimes fell by default on Access to Healthcare teams who may not be trained or best suited to assessing health and social care needs and human rights, potentially putting trusts at risk of judicial review.

- **The reliability and provision of social care support is patchy and inconsistent, operating on overstretched budgets and without any funding from central government for this provision.** Many statutory teams are uncertain of their legal duties and fail to provide adequate information, accommodation and support for the increasing numbers of people facing destitution. Evidence from Northern Irish trusts highlighted **disjointed practice around assessments**, with third sector organisations routinely struggling to get social care teams to properly assess and follow up on safeguarding referrals. This was echoed by trust staff who acknowledged that within their own trust they had recently set up a referral pathway for people with health needs, as cases were *"getting bounced around several different departments before they eventually landed with [a team who would look into it], maybe 7 weeks later."*
- In some areas in Northern Ireland, organisations flagged how social care teams would only factor in financial support for the child, but not for the parent supporting the child, leading to parents unwilling to engage or seek support:

"It becomes this ping pong, where occasionally they'll say, our duty is to provide support for the child, but not for the mum. This is said quite often shockingly. It's always challengeable, but sometimes that's the first sort of thing that we hear: 'our duty is for the children. We can support children, not the mum.' And of course when the parent hears that, they'll say no." (Third sector organisation, Northern Ireland)
- **People with lived experience highlighted what a humiliating, distressing and intrusive process it can be trying to get the support that they are legally entitled to** – including families fleeing domestic violence and adults with terminal illnesses who have lived in the UK for decades. In many areas, **third sector organisations continue to play a vital role in supporting vulnerable people to challenge local gatekeeping and provide interim basic emergency support where possible.**
- While social care support can offer a lifeline to destitute individuals, there is a **significant discrepancy in the subsistence rates provided by social care teams. Vulnerable people face a postcode lottery of support** and, at best, receive significantly less than they would through Universal Credit; in some areas, they receive even less than the asylum support rate. Whilst some social care teams in England have sought to introduce local subsistence policies, we could not find evidence of any set rates or local policies in Northern Ireland:

"There is no framework or matrix as to what support they provide. So you might have somebody who's destitute with a child and they will give them vouchers. Somebody [else] who's destitute and they'll give them cash and it's very sporadic [...] there isn't really that parameter as to what the support should look like, what the minimum standard is and what scale is provided." (Third sector organisation, Northern Ireland)
- Trusts and social care teams across the UK can also face significant and unfunded costs supporting households with NRPF, particularly when providing complex care packages. One health and social care trust reported a case providing a significant care package to an individual at a cost of over £180,000 over a multi-year period.
- **With robust social care eligibility criteria, many people are unable to ever access social care, refuges or places of safety, despite presenting with vulnerabilities and at risk of harm.** Whilst some people may be able to access limited short-term support through charities, many may find themselves dependent on exploitative support networks, stuck in abusive relationships or facing street homelessness

Implications for policy and practice

There are wide calls from [local government](#), [cross-party parliamentary committees](#) and people with lived experience for a significant reform of the NRPF policy, including a call to end the use of the NRPF condition. In the meantime, there needs to be significant improvements to fix a patchy and dysfunctional local safety net and tackle rising destitution.

1. Improving governance structures for tackling destitution

- Drawing on [Scotland's Ending Destitution Together strategy](#), The Executive Office (TEO) in NI should co-develop a national strategy to tackle migrant destitution, including developing statutory guidance for NI, in partnership with the Housing Executive, the Department of Health, health and social care trusts, the voluntary and community sector and people with lived experience.

- The Executive and the Department for Communities should ensure that addressing the impact of the NRPF policy is weaved into the Executive's Anti-Poverty Strategy 2025 – 2035.
- The Department for Communities should ensure that the [Inter-Departmental Homelessness Action Plan \(IDHAP\)](#) explicitly addresses the impact of the NRPF policy under Priority 1 (Health and Wellbeing), Priority 3 (Support for Those Leaving Places of Care, including Institutional Care and Hospitals), and Priority 4 (Support for Families, including those Experiencing Domestic Violence).
- The Housing Executive should ensure that addressing the impact of the NRPF policy is included in the Ending Homelessness Together strategy 2022 – 2027 annual progress reports, specifically assessing housing need related to immigration status, including people affected by NRPF.
- Senior leadership within TEO, the Department of Health, the Housing Executive, the Department for Communities and the five health and social care trusts should recognise that failing to tackle migrant destitution prevents being able to address wider strategic priorities including addressing poverty and ending homelessness together.
- Senior leadership within health and social care trusts should ensure there is a joined-up ending migrant destitution strategy at the local level, covering policy and provision across children's social care and adult social care and that wider trust strategies including child poverty, public health, VAWG include addressing the needs of people with NRPF and tackling migrant destitution.

2. Providing clear and transparent information and advice so that people know their rights

- Health and social care trusts and the Housing Executive should address the lack of clear and publicly available information on support available by providing, at a minimum, a publicly accessible page on each trust's as well as the Housing Executive's website, with information about referral processes, access to immigration advice and local community support.
- In the absence of the UK government reinstating legal aid for immigration matters, The Executive Office and the newly relaunched NI Strategic Migration Partnership should draw on the learning from the [Scottish partnership model between COSLA and the International Organisation for Migration](#), providing nationwide immigration advice to vulnerable people, referred by social care teams.
- In the interim, trusts should consider funding or commissioning legal aid advice for residents at risk of destitution, setting up safe spaces with clear firewalls, in partnership with third-sector organisations for legal advice on routes to regularisation, and access to services.
- The UK government should ensure there is clearer and more publicly available information on the process of applying to lift the NRPF condition, including a more explicit right to appeal refusals.

3. Empowering local government to, at a minimum, meet its legal responsibilities and ultimately develop preventative approaches to tackling poverty and exclusion

- If health and social care trusts are expected to provide a safety net for vulnerable people, they need to be adequately resourced by the UK government.
- The Executive Office and Department of Health should ensure that trust staff receive ongoing training, advice and support with collecting data on NRPF cases and embedding statutory guidance into local policy and practice. This could include mirroring good practice in Scotland where the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities have issued an annual NRPF [survey](#) to local authorities for three years running, generating key aggregate data on the number of case referrals, supported NRPF households and evidencing changes in the profile of people impacted and the increasing level of need.

- Health and social care trusts should embed [NRPF Network guidance](#) and use the '[support for migrant families web tool](#)' to establish available options for families.
- Health and social care trusts and the Housing Executive should ensure there is a consistent, standardised and sensitive assessment and case management process, treating people with respect and dignity.
- Health and social care trusts should develop localised subsistence policies with clear minimum acceptable rates, building in the flexibility to adapt to individuals' needs, drawing on recent case law and guidance.
- Health and social care trusts should take an earlier preventative approach by proactively reaching out to migrant communities at risk of falling into deep poverty, including information on Home Office fee waivers, change of conditions applications, free school meals and access to childcare.

4. Widening entitlement to public funds to support the most vulnerable

- The UK government should remove all discretionary welfare funds from the list of public funds to allow devolved administrations and local government to provide discretionary emergency support to all residents in need, regardless of their immigration status.
- The UK government should grant mainstream access to those benefits and passported benefits especially intended to support vulnerable people and children to ensure they are open to all children and vulnerable people, regardless of their or their parents' immigration status.

5. Listening and learning from the voices of people with lived experience of NRPF

Both the UK government and health and social care trusts should apply principles within decision-making and frontline services that promote "fairness, openness and effective care, and embed the idea that people will always be treated with respect and dignity" as recommended in the Windrush Lessons Learned Review and actively involve people with lived experience in co-producing and designing local strategy, policy and practice.

UNDERSTANDING MIGRANT DESTITUTION IN THE UK

[Understanding Migrant Destitution in the UK](#) is a UK-wide research and knowledge exchange project (2022–2025), funded by abrIn Financial Fairness Trust, exploring the effects of UK immigration policy on migrant destitution in the UK, highlighting the scale and changing face of migrant destitution and the key role of local authorities in providing support. The study involved a mixed methods approach including a survey sent to all UK local authorities, secondary data analysis of administrative data and deep dive qualitative research in seven case study sites, interviewing key local authority staff, local stakeholders and partners as well as with people with lived experience.

For further information, please contact: lucy.leon@compas.ox.ac.uk